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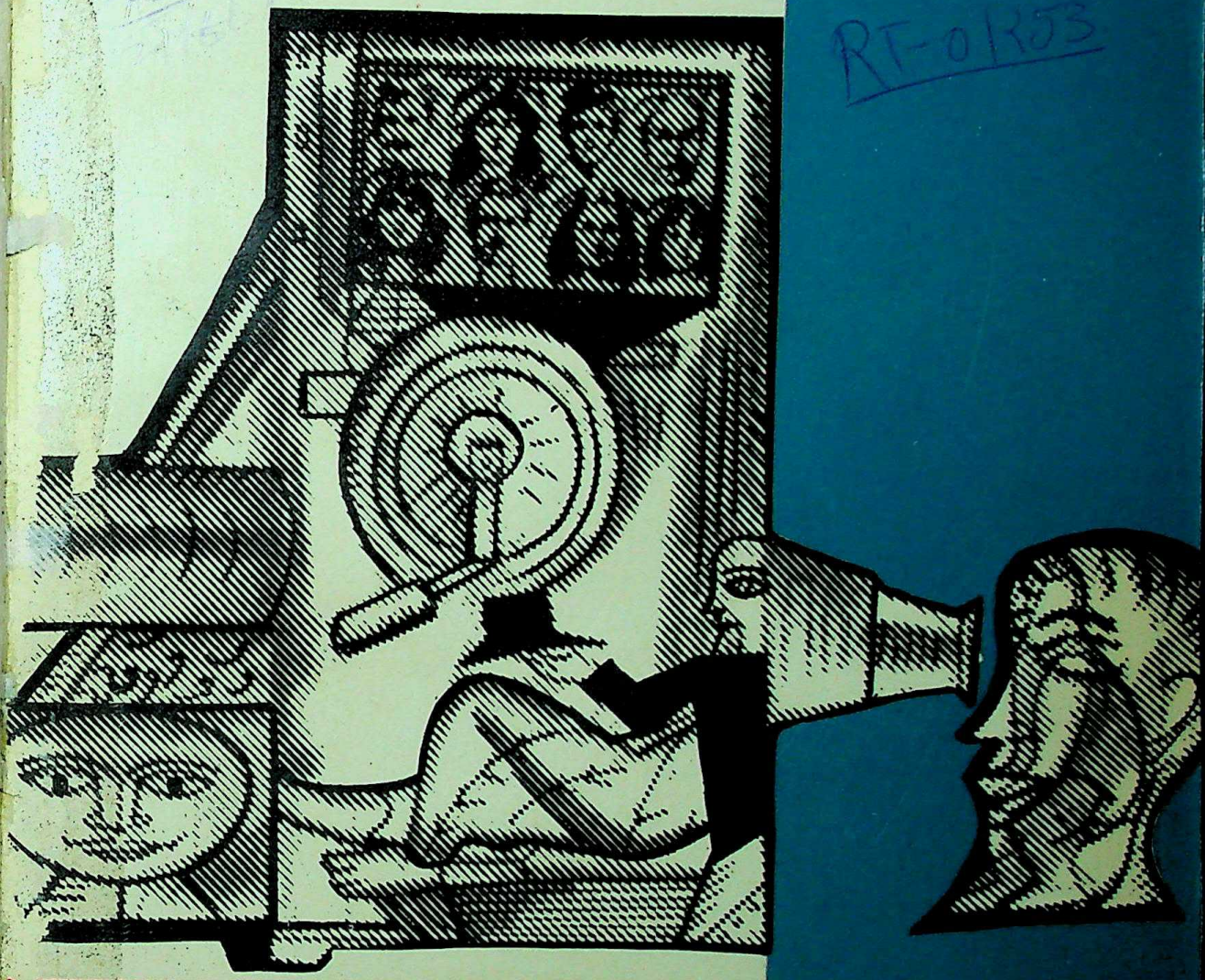
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165
JAN.-FEB. '95
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INDIAN LITERATURE

SAHITYA AKADEMI'S BI-MONTHLY JOURNAL

No. 165 : Jan.-Feb., 1995
Vol.XXXVIII, No. 1

Editorial Office :

Sahitya Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan,
35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110001.

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Edited by K. Satchidanandan and published by Indra Nath Choudhuri and printed by him at Vimal Offset, 1/11804 (A-26), Panchsheel Garden, Naveen Shahdara, Delhi-110032.

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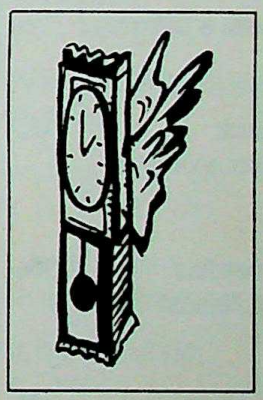
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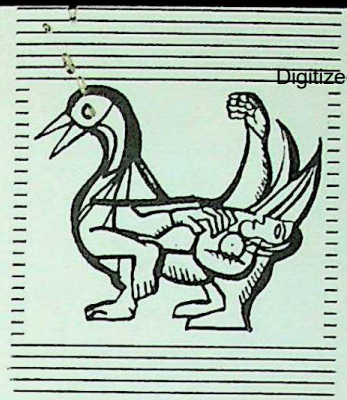


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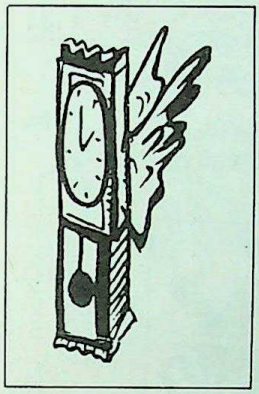
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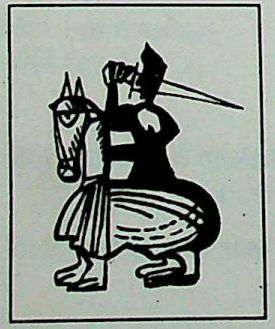
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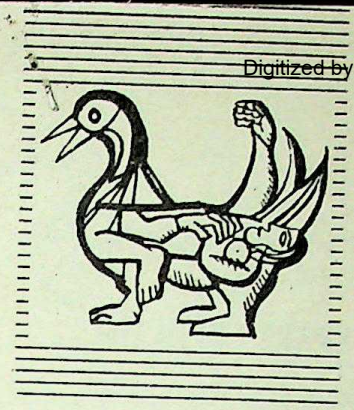


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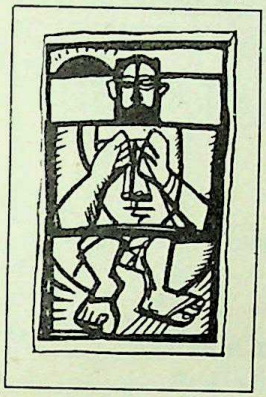
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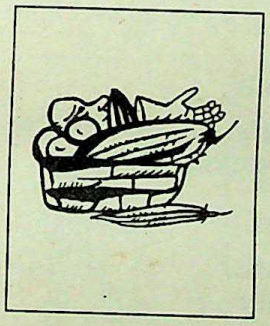


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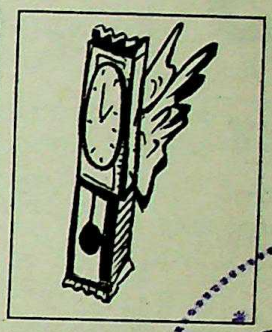


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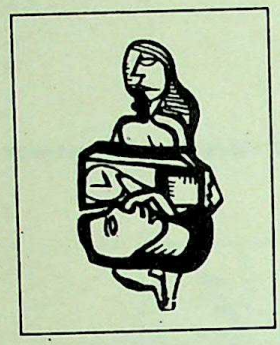
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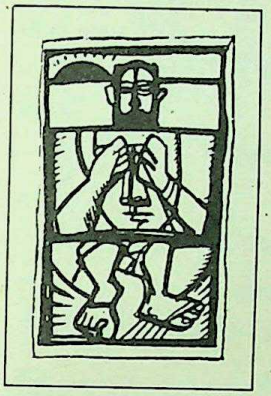
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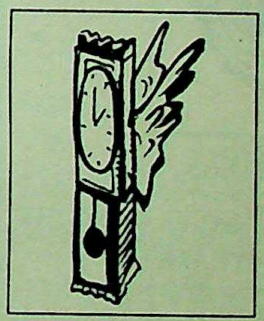
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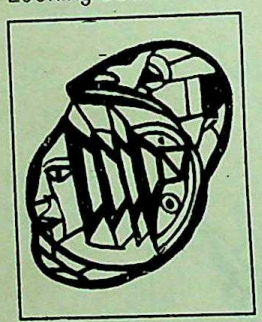
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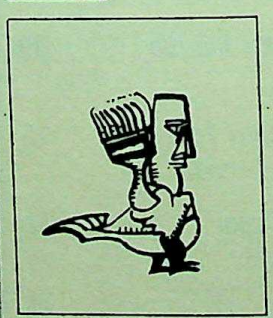
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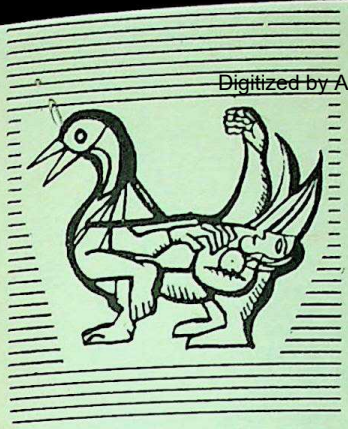


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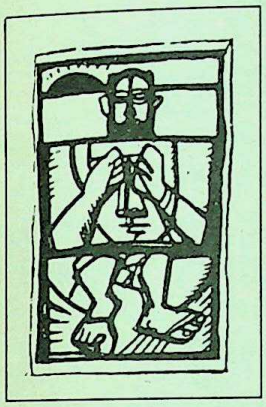
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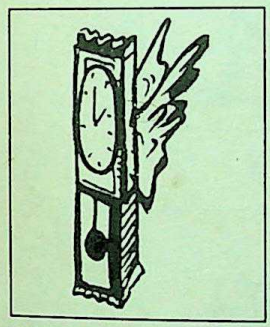
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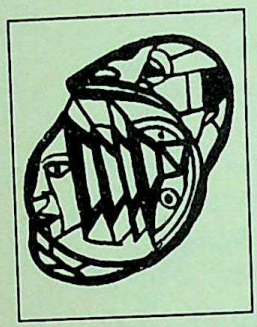
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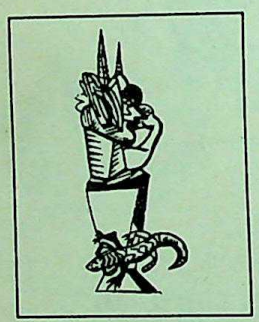
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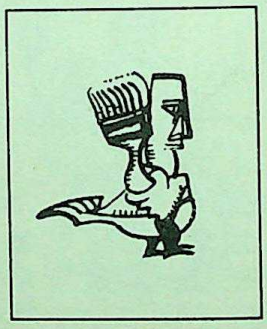
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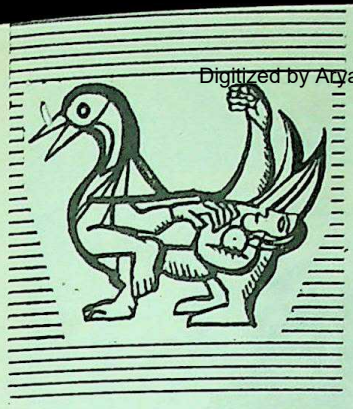


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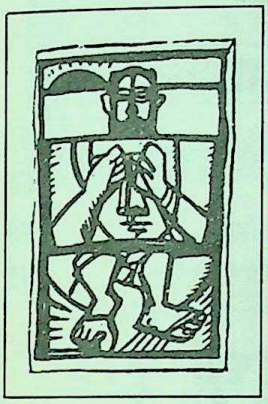
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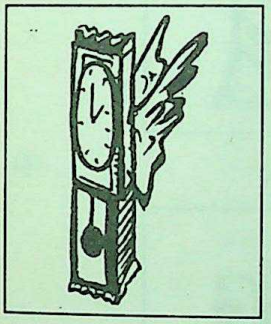
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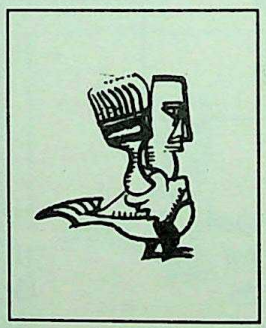
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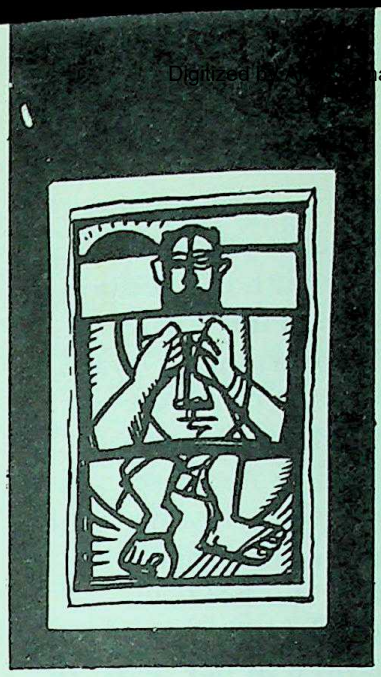


OUR CONTRIBUTORS 182

Motifs : Madhusudhanan

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Is the Author Really Dead?

THERE is a story that has gained wide circulation among literary circles in India, of an encounter between a distinguished author and a distinguished reader: Mahasweta Devi's story 'Stanadayini', by the author's own account, is a parable of India after decolonisation. Like the protagonist Jashoda, India is a mother-by-hire. All classes of people, the post-war rich, the ideologues, the indigenous bureaucracy, the diasporics, the people who are sworn to protect the new state, abuse and exploit her. If nothing is done to sustain her, nothing given back to her, and if scientific help comes too late, she will die of a consuming cancer. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, the well-known deconstructionist scholar does not agree with this interpretation of the story. According to her it is not useful from the perspective of a study of the subaltern. Here the representation of India is by way of the subaltern as metaphor. By the rules of a parable the logic of the connection between the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor must be made absolutely explicit. The attempt to represent the subaltern as such should be excluded from the story in order to disclose Mahasweta's parable in the light of the traffic between the historian and the writer. Gayatri insists that the gist of Mahasweta's own reading of 'Stanadayini', that citizens of the nation must give something to the nation rather than merely take from it, is one of the many

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slogans of a militant nationalism. Thus Mahasweta's reading of her own story signifies that narrative of nationalism that is perceived as a product of the culture of imperialism. In short the author's position is only one possible subject-position and that too the most irrelevant, why even a dangerous, one being full of imperial overtones. Gayatri, at a seminar, set out to explain the story from various other subject positions placing the story in Marxist Feminism, Liberal Feminism and in a Theory of Women's body using concepts like *Jouissance* and gendering, focusing on the subaltern as gendered subject rather than as an allegorical seme for Mother India while also condemning the glamour that the authority of the author's reading still holds in orthodox literary-critical circles. (Gayatri Spivak's elaborate deconstructive enterprise is now available for perusal in her book, *In Other Worlds*). The story goes that at this stage when the critic following Roland Barthes was about to declare the author dead, Mahasweta Devi herself who was at the seminar stood up and declared that she was very much alive and would not permit the critic to have her way as long as she, with her perception, was alive.

I have heard this story from dependable sources; however it is the story as a metaphor rather than a factual event that interests us here. Has the author been really buried with no possibilities of a resurrection, has the Kingdom of the Critic (who claims to represent the silent reader) really come? Is creative writing the empty hat from which the critic-magician 'creates' the fluttering pigeons of shy meanings and the vulnerable rabbits of hidden ideologies?

In the Western tradition, Mallarme who believed that it is not the author but it is the language that speaks is said to have first implied the death of the author; Valery too privileged language though he diluted Mallarme's position; Proust made his very life a work for which his own book was the model. The surrealists recommended the abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning by asking the hand to write before the head was aware of it. Modern linguistics declared that enunciation is empty and the author is never more than the instance writing. Bakhtin decentred all discourses and fractured all authoritative codes by privileging the disseminating force of a 'centrifugal language.' Barthes denied the existence of an 'Author-God' who fills his work with a single theological meaning by turning his attention from 'work' to 'text'. Derrida denied all 'origins' and 'first-principles' and believed in the continuous postponement of a final signification thus making the author redundant. Foucault thought that the coming into being of the author constitutes a

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moment of 'individualization' in the history of literature as well as ideas. To modern authors like Flaubert, Proust or Kafka, he thought, writing means death, sacrifice, voluntary self-effacement. The writer sets up all contrivances between himself and his writing so that the subject cancels out every sign of his individuality, so that the writer's only sign is the singularity of his absence. But affirming the author's disappearance alone will not do for us; we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches and watch for the openings that his disappearance uncovers. The 'author-function' is not the mere attribution of a 'work' to an author; it is the outcome of a whole operation that recognises continuities, discovers traits, practises exclusions and resolves disunities in the author by the principles of evolution, maturation and influence with the help of biography, sociology and psychology. The relationship or non-relationship with an author constitutes one of the discursive properties of discourse. We may have to return to the theme of the subject not to re-establish its founding role or to resurrect the theme of the 'originating subject', but to grasp the subject's points of insertion, modes of functioning and system of dependencies. The new questions to be posed are: 'How, under what conditions and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse? What place can it occupy in each type of discourse, what functions can it assume, and by obeying what rules?'

While we may oppose the idea of privileging the author's subject position against other positions assumed by readers and critics, there is little harm in giving it its due place as one of the positions that gives a clue to the authorial intent. We shall respect Mahasweta's right to reveal, and if necessary defend, her position while not denying to Gayatri Spivak her right to differ and offer alternate possibilities. This mutual respect and plurality are the very foundations of democratic literary practice.

Another Year

INDIAN Literature is celebrating the arrival of the New Year by a transformation of its size and a reorientation of its contents. The change of size from Demy to Royal Octavo, it is hoped, will help us accommodate more material as also facilitate better lay-out. The change in content—greater accent on creative writing in Indian languages that also means de-emphasising critica,

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material—comes from the recognition of the fact that there are quite a few academic journals in India that promote critical writing in English while *Indian Literature* is perhaps the only journal that has consistently been promoting Indian creative writing in English translation over the last thirtyseven years. This does not of course mean a total exclusion of critical discussion : we will continue to publish daringly original articles that attempt to review the past or evaluate the present from novel perspectives, while taking care to avoid, as far as possible, redundant and recycled products of the academic industry. Here again emphasis will be on articles on trends and texts in Indian languages since Indian writing in English has a host of other platforms and new ones, like *Civil Lines,* to cite one example, are still coming up. Indian writing in English, for us, is no more or no less important than writing in the other languages of India, including the unrecognised languages, often dubbed as 'dialects', that are beginning to show sure signs of literary growth. We do mean to hold discussions on topics of immediate relevance like the marginalisation of Indian languages, the indigenisation of critical discourse, the meaning of concepts like 'modernism', 'postmodernism' and 'post-coloniality' in the Indian context, the loss of the mother tongue, reorienting literary education to free it of colonial hang-overs, critiquing orientalism and de-colonising culture. We are also introducing some new columns from this issue like 'Books' where we briefly introduce books of note and 'Neighbours' where we mean to feature specimens of creative writing from the neighbouring countries especially of the sub-continent as a token of cultural fraternity. Last year we were able to give you some special numbers and special sections devoted to languages, themes and trends. Efforts in this direction will continue. The major problem we face is the inadequacy of good translations. We believe that Indian writers in English with proficiency in at least one other Indian language should come forward to take upon themselves the crucial cultural task of translating creative writing in Indian languages into English following the example set by A.K. Ramanujan, Dilip Chitre, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Jayanta Mahapatra, Vinay Dharwadker, Ranjit Hoskote, Eunice D'Souza and others. Let us also invite detailed responses from our readers for our 'Response' column. We are glad to offer you another year of dedicated literary endeavour along with our warm new year greetings. □

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SHORT STORIES

NO DEVOTION, NO SALVATION

Ashapurna Devi

QUITE unexpectedly did my friend come over to our house. As soon as he stepped in, he thrust his hand into his pocket and whisked out of it two cinema tickets.

'Get ready at once', he said, handing the tickets over to me. 'I purchased the tickets in advance for this Saturday's night show. They've been advertising the film for a good many days on end. Lest they should be discarded, I've come a long way down here to give them to you.'

My friend was addicted to luxury and spent much money on it.

'Why didn't you go yourselves?' I asked, puzzled. 'What prevented you!'

A pale smile flitted across his face.

'Fate!' he said. 'News came—it didn't find another day to come—that my grandmaa's on verge of death. It's doubtful, the news said, whether she would survive this night.'

'Your grandmaa!' I exclaimed, nonplussed and bewildered. 'We got invited that day to your grandmaa's *shradha*, didn't we?'

'That was of my own grandmaa,' he said. 'I'm talking about my wife's grandmaa. Had she been my own grandmaa, the programme wouldn't have been changed.'

He paused and made a wry face.

'Now I'm off', he said. 'If the old woman, God forbidding, dies before we reach her house, my wife will never keep me at peace. She had worn a Dhakai sari. She doffed the Dhakai sari and donned a mill-made one. In the brief space between her doffing the Dhakai sari and donning the mill-made sari, I have come running over to you. You two go, see the film and give my soul rest.'

In the twinkling of an eye the two-seater disappeared from before the gate. He was really living in happiness. Despite the control in petrol, he was roaming throughout the length and breadth of Calcutta, marking

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the body of the car with 'ARP'.

I could not deny being pleased at being given the tickets free. My wife was mad for cinema. Besides, I had heard that the film boasted of all the star-actors and actresses. I was sure she would jump at the idea of going to the film. And we would together pass a happy Saturday evening enjoying the film. I never knew how my holidays passed. I spent the spare time in searching for rice, wheat, sugar and such rare things as coal.

Let it be. I could list many other familial problems. They won't end. They would, instead, agitate the ocean of grief. Besides, who had the patience to listen to the recital of sorrows? Everybody was 'drinking water' in his store, though my wife often said, 'Everybody but you is getting everything they need.' I did not mind her saying this, though. I was habituated, the truth to tell, to different doses of such rigmarole. Now at this moment I started imagining about what my wife would say to my plan to go to the cinema together this night. Bubbling over with happiness I walked over to the store-room to peep in. I saw a padlock on the door of the store-room. I hurried into our main room only to find her engaged in getting dressed. I smiled, for she had eavesdropped on our conversation.

She was unfolding her Shantipuri sari. I heaved a sigh of relief, for we did not have enough time at our disposal. I conjured up a broad smile on my face, like one that accompanies patting on one's back.

'Well,' I said, 'it's so good of you to have got ready. Let's enjoy ourselves free of cost this night. We'll entertain ourselves to the first show of *Shesher Davi.*

'What nonsense are you talking?' she shrilled. 'How would we enjoy ourselves free of cost today?'

'Didn't you see Nirmal coming down and giving me two cinema tickets?' I said, sort of puzzled.

'Do you think I keep eavesdropping on you for twenty-four hours on end as if I have no other work to do?' she blurted out. 'Did your friend manage two sacks of coal so that he displayed his munificence on you?'

'Maybe he did,' I said. 'What else is the meaning of your unfolding your sari fringed with gold-thread?'

'There's going to be a *sinni* (an oblation of sweets offered to deities) at Haribabu's house,' she replied. *Masima* (aunt) herself came and asked me over to it.'

'What about the tickets?' I asked her plaintively.

'What can I suggest about the tickets?' she said indifferently.

'Should I throw the tickets away?' I tried to cajole her into agreeing to go to the cinema.

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'What's the way out', she said. 'Do you want me to be immersed in sin by going to the cinema, leaving aside the *puja* of Satyanarayan? Your friend didn't find any other time to give you the tickets!'

She put on the sari, ran the comb, perhaps thrice, through her hair, anointed her face smooth with hesline, put on her forehead a piece of tinsel and took the key ring out of the end of her discarded sari.

'Why have you sat down sullen?' she said, while tying the key ring to the end of the sari she had put on, as if to console me. 'Why not go yourself to the cinema? Who forbids your going alone?'

It was the first time she had suggested to me to go alone to the cinema. Had she not been invited to the *sinni* by her *Masima*, she would have, suffice it to say, revolted at the idea of my going alone to the cinema.

'I won't stay home', she said. 'You'd better pass the time in seeing the film than stay alone here.'

To give vent to my feelings at this moment would violate genteel taste 'I won't feel happy, seeing the film alone without you by me.' I said, deliberately softening my voice.

'Don't talk nonsense!' she said. 'If you like to, go to the cinema. If you don't feel like going stay home. Don't keep the cook waiting.'

'Won't you eat?' I asked her.

'I'll sup at *Masima's* house,' she said. 'I think *Masima* won't allow me to come home without partaking of their dinner. Her new son-in-law will come today, Lili's husband I mean. *Masima* told me to join in the rejoicing."

Which meant Satyanarayan was not her main fascination. Her *Masima* knew as much as she did she was clever and witty and she sang well.

'What's the necessity of rejoicing with another woman's husband?'I persisted in the hope of changing her decision. The truth to tell, I did not relish her desire to blow her own trumpet. 'Why not rejoice with your own ...'

I stopped short, for she cast a side-glance at me and darted out defiantly.

My own desire to go to the cinema got dampened. At first I decided to give the tickets away to the cook and resign myself to the loneliness of the house. On second thoughts I changed my decision, for I felt my manliness revolt. Why should I brook defeat to my wife? Should she rejoice with other people without caring to consider my difficulties and problems? Why should I keep on dancing to her tune? We, husbands, indulge the whims of our wives that often offend noble taste, and good manners. Now I must needs show to her that

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I could, if I liked to, rejoice with my friend without her by me.

I took out my motor-cycle, in order to translate my thoughts into practice, and cycled over to the house of my friend, Abani. My friend's wife was beautiful. Because of this my wife cherished a sort of envy towards her. With the object of tickling the jealousy of my wife, I decided to take Abani and his wife to the cinema, no matter how much I had to part with in buying another ticket. I would invite Abani and his wife to see the film, take them in a taxi over and treat them to boot, to ice-creams, potato-chips and other things that contribute to making a film enjoyable. And I would narrate to my wife in detail how happily and delightedly Abani's wife ate all these things.

But God disposed what I had proposed in a different way.

Said Abani, 'It's not in our fate to see the film tonight. I had tried to get two tickets, but could not. My wife had insisted on seeing the first-night show. She always insists on first-night shows. Ill-luck has it that our son tripped down the stairs and got hurt on his forehead. I'm going out to bring iodine and cotton. You're late. If I had been informed beforehand ...'

He pronounced the last few words in such a way to imply that if he had been informed beforehand his son would have hesitated to get hurt on his forehead.

Cursing Abani inwardly, I cycled in the direction of Nikhilesh's house. Though not beautiful, his wife had the reputation of being educated. I got, I dare say, some sort of pleasure talking to her even though I knew she was an eyesore to my wife only because of her being educated.

Hearing my proposal, Nikhilesh melted in modesty.

'We would have gladly gone to the cinema,' he said, 'had not my wife thrown a fit.'

'What happened to her?' I asked him, disappointed.

'She quarrelled with my Maa', he replied. 'Her throwing the fit is the effect of the quarrel. Nowadays it has become difficult to make my Maa see reason.'

'Go to hell!' I said, inwardly though.

I cycled over to the house of Shashanka, boiling over with anger. Shashanka's wife was not possessed of such qualities as beauty and education. Nor was she attractive as a companion. Luck had really left me and would even have a burned *shol* (a large tubular fish) jump into water.

'We would have been extremely happy going with you to the cinema', Shashanka said. as I broached the proposal. 'You've come at such bad time.'

'What's the matter with you?' I asked him, resigning myself to

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my fate.

'My elder brother's in-laws have come from Shibpur,' he said. 'It won't look good if I take my wife out before their very eyes.'

'What prevents you from taking your own wife out?' I reasoned with him. 'Problems crop up if you take another man's wife out. Is not your elder brother's wife home to attend to the guests?'

'Yes, she's home,' he said. 'She's engrossed in gossiping with them. The duty of looking after the needs of the guests has automatically devolved upon my wife. You know this is the practice common to every Bengali family. Besides, I hate to give any body else in the family an opportunity to talk about my wife.'

Exasperated, I mounted my motor-cycle and made to go towards the house of Kamalaksha when Shashanka said from behind my back, 'Perhaps you have no time left. Our watch has gone out of order.'

I did not heed his warning. Let the film show off the scene of war and a string of speeches to glorify the war. Kamalaksha was the best companion. He was a lawyer and his practice was not flourishing. He had not married as yet. He had no one about who might pose an obstacle to his going to the cinema with me. He had but to put on a *punjabi* over his *guernsey*. The only problem was whether I would find him at home.

He was home. He came out, hearing my painful scream. He asked his servant to pull my motor-cycle straight and he himself pulled me up.

'What's the matter?' he said. 'What made you come riding your motor-cycle like mad? You've fractured your leg at this old age. Have you got hurt?'

'Yes, I have,' I twanged. 'I came to capture you. I stumbled against the raised terrace in front of your house. It's a crime to keep a raised terrace in front of a building!'

'It's really a crime to keep a raised terrace in front of a building,' he admitted. 'I'll get it broken tomorrow to be sure. But what has made you come down a long way to such a poor fellow as me? Has your wife gone to her father's or have you quarrelled with her?'

'What will you do, hearing my tale of sorrow?' I said. 'You'd better have a rickshaw called.'

My wife returned late at night.

'Are you all right!' she enquired, seeing I had a sheet over me... Her voice sounded anxious.

I did not answer her query. Instead I asked, 'Why are you so late?'

She smiled, an embarrassed smile.

'Man has no way out of what is ordained by fate,' she said. 'When I reached Haribabu's house I heard the new brother-in-law had plan-

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ned to take us all to the cinema. He had already bought tickets. I saw a car waiting at the gate to take us to the cinema. At first I had said 'no' to going to the cinema but Masima did not pay any heed to my plea.'

When she was ensconced in the hall with other companions watching the film, I had been running from one house to another, with two first-class tickets in my pocket, and insisting on my friends and their wives accompanying me to the filmshow!

I riveted my eyes on my wife and asked, 'What about Satyanarayan?'

'Why are you joking about Satyanarayan?' she said. 'Masima and the priest didn't go to see the film. On return from the show we worshipped the deity and ate his *prasad*. Then we were treated to sumptuous dinner and merry making followed. In order to eavesdrop on the conversation of the new couple, Satu-Thakurpo hung a rope from the roof down the window. *Mesomashay* (uncle—Masima's husband) detected him hanging the rope. This entailed much merriment.'

My wife had drawn a live picture of merriment she had enjoyed to her heart's content. She had been treated to every ingredient of joy and even now looked the very picture of happiness. Thanks to the blessings of the Satyanarayan she had found herself immersed in merriment.

But me? An insect of hell. I had no devotion and, as such, no salvation, no hope of salvation. I inwardly cried shame upon my desire to retaliate on her.

She changed her dress and, taking a pot of *jarda* (a preparation of tobacco to be chewed with betel-leaves), sat at the corner of my bed.

'Did you go to the cinema?' she asked me in a soft voice.

'Yes,' I said and turned over.

'You did go?' she said. 'You did well. I had thought you were sleeping since then; you're so lazy a fellow. How did you enjoy the film? It's a good film, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I said and spread the sheet further over my leg smeared with turmeric. □

Translated from Bengali by **Bhaskar Roy Barman**

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THE TRANSFER OF LAND

Amar Mitra

AS they kept thinking about Bibijan, they did not notice when the afternoon changed to evening. The two brothers had been sitting still since the morning, deep in thought. No trace of the deed. The search for it inevitably led to a search for Bibijan. Matin Mian did not care for the deed, he thought only about Bibijan. Yet the moment he looked for the lost deed, he remembered Bibijan.

'Matin, have you searched your room carefully?' asked Achha Mian.

Matin sat looking up at the sky, and did not catch what Achha Mian said. He was thinking alternately of Bibijan and his mischievous brother. May be it was Achha who had played a trick—an old hand at selling the same plot of land to several people secretly. The rascal must have kept the deed in a secret place.

As no response came from Matin, Achha's two yellow front teeth disappeared as he shut his mouth with a grim expression. So it was all Matin's doing. The deed was certainly hidden in his room, either inside the roof tiles or in an old jar. A typical trick of a swindler's trade, and he was quite capable of it. The bloke lived by his wits, using his whistle as a danger signal at the flashboards, his habitual haunt.

'D'you hear me, Matin?' yelled Achha.

'Oh, yes', Matin replied with a start.

'Where's the deed?'

Achha and Matin Mian were in fact sizing up each other. They did not notice when it became dark. The day was so short at this time of year that one hardly felt its presence or absence.

Behind the two-brothers sitting in the courtyard was a clump of bamboo trees where the shades of the evening deepened with a nip in the air. The tumble-down huts of the two brothers were on the edge of a long line of bamboo trees and wild shrubs. They had searched everywhere for the deed and then gave up in frustration. So they were still sitting, lost in thought. The deed—they must have it to sell the land, or they would starve to death this winter.

'How much land did Bibijan sell us?' queried Matin.

Achha Mian reflected. Bibijan was the wife of their elder brother Kalu Mondal who was no more. After Kalu's death Bibijan came into possession of some property in accordance with the Islamic Faraji.

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She sold it to the two brothers and went to another village after marrying a second time.

Achha worked it out mentally and said to his brother, I don't know the exact area of land, but both of us had the same area as our elder brother, since our father's property was divided into three parts since we had no sister, and mother had long been dead and buried.

Matin was never good at calculation, yet he nodded with confidence. Achha had a better conception of landed property, and that was quite natural for him. Matin had to do nothing with all this. He had spent so many years as a guard for Haider Ali's gambling den. The police used to come from the Deganga side, and as soon as the police car emerged from behind the glass factory, Matin would blow his whistle and Haider Ali would run off with his gambling board. Matin earned one rupee everytime he whistled and was fined eight annas if he gave a wrong signal. Extreme caution was necessary on the days of village market when constables and *habildars* were seen getting down from bus. The peon of the police officer who was often seen without his uniform could earn a few extra bucks if he could catch the gamblers unawares. If refused, he could bundle them all to the police station. How could Matin whose job was just to sound a whistle at the gambler's game know of the valuation of land?

This year severe drought had sent down the level of ground water. Only a few days ago they had sold dry straws instead of paddy. Since one could not survive on this, they had to sell their land.

Alas, who on earth heard of the sale of land in the month of Aghran! The two brothers were fairly old, yet they had never done anything so scandalous. They had in their possession ten *kattas* of land though they were not sure about their proprietorship. They had sold their lands as often as they wished, and now they waited for the deed of the land they purchased from Bibijan which still remained unsold.

Matin nodded as Achha explained the whole matter. Over their heads flew winter birds spreading their wings that bloated out the horizon. Achha Mian tightened his *gamcha* around him, and Matin sat listless wrapped in his worn-out handloom shawl.

'The only land left now belongs to Bibijan; the rest has been sold off,' whispered Achha.

Matin thought his elder brother Kalu Mondal lying in his grave must have been dissolved into the earth. His wife had married again and gone to another village after selling her husband's land to them.

His head covered with a shawl. Matin threw a meaningful look at his brother and asked 'Do you remember sister-in-law?'

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Achha looked at him in surprise. Why did he ask this? Achha thought only of the deed and did not care for anything else. He had no doubt about it. He was at a Madrasa for sometime and worked as a peon of the Moulavi for two years, carrying his shoes and umbrella. Achha thought it was just a trick played by Matin. Why did he bring up something like this when they were discussing the deed? A deed and a woman—how different they are!

As he thought of it Achha stared fixedly, his eyes burning with anger. He gnashed the few teeth still left in his mouth and he was itching for action. Achha thought that Matin was trying to evade the question. In other words the deed was with him.

He roared, 'Look Matin, don't you try to make fool of me.'

Matin almost jumped at such an insinuation that made his blood boil. 'None of your tricks'; he gnashed his teeth. He cried, 'Don't you accuse me falsely. I shall bring along Haidar Ali to settle the matter.'

Achha screamed, 'Let your gambling partners come. I know you've hidden the deed, and you expect me not to say a word about it!'

The two figures sitting in the dark stood up and began to scream at each other with equal vocal strength. They jumped around calling each other 'thief', indistinguishable in their heads, faces, hands and legs.

They were twins; it was so difficult to know one from another. Only Matin had no teeth, and Achha had a stoop. Matin had a shawl and Achha had a *gamcha*.

Their wives came running out of their huts. They had lost count of how many times the two brothers snarled at each other since the morning.

II

Neither Matin nor Achha could recollect when it happened—probably in the year before the great flood. Almost five years ago their elder brother died of an ulcer in the stomach on the way to hospital. Kalu was short, yet he gave the twin brothers protection under his wings.

When he died with his eyes open after three violent convulsions due to stomach pain, Bibijan had a three-year-old baby in arms, and the wives of the twins were also in the family way.

One day after Kalu's death Matin whispered to Achha, 'I could have married sister-in-law a few years later, but it is no longer possible now.'

As a matter of fact, Matin was mad with joy at his wife's concep-

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tion. He had so many things to do, since he was soon going to be a father.

After Kalu's burial Bibijan used to sit still in her room. Her beauty was simply ravishing. She looked like the wife of a lord. Kalu was lucky to have spent his brief life with such a wife. She did not like her first husband.

Kalu visited him rather frequently. Bibijan was seen sitting engrossed in thought. Nobody could know what was going on in the mind of the wife of Ajgar Mondal, Bibijan's first husband, a butcher by profession. He was the leading light among the experts in the slaughter-house of the most famous man in Harowa, Latif Mondal. He began his work in the small hours and finished slaughtering three cows before it was light, and then vultures would come in flocks. In fact, Ajgar Mondal was always surrounded by vultures. Around noon he came back home, his *lungi* smeared with the blood of the slaughtered cows. How could Bibijan live with such a husband? She refused to bear him children, for she feared the butchers were destined to die childless, and struck by all sorts of diseases as they grew old, their skins peeling off and eyes rotting. So Bibijan left him and married Kalu.

Ajgar Ali died after three days' illness. Bibijan learnt it from Motaleb Mian, one of his companions. Motaleb told Kalu that if she waited for another six months she could have got her share of the property of Ajgar. Now it was being plundered by all sorts of people.

Kalu nodded slowly, 'No, no, she couldn't enjoy the butcher's property. She would have died before him if she did not leave him.'

Bibijan did not speak a word after Kalu's burial. Her eyes went dry as if she had no more tears to shed. No one even heard her footsteps. She kept gazing silently at her husband's grave. Then she saw menfolk coming the same way to her place.

Achha had a plan. He said, 'Bhabi, marry again, and —?'

'And what?' Bibijan's eyes met Achha's.

'Give us the land you have got from your husband. We shall pay for it.'

Matin was angry at Achha's suggestion. He wished Bibijan to marry him, though he knew it was not possible since his own wife was pregnant. Bibijan was so dear to his elder brother who thought himself lucky to have her as a wife, but the poor man had to leave her for ever. So she should be persuaded to stay here, for that would bring peace to Kalu's soul.

Achha was more worried about his future. He had a mind to enlarge his property by purchasing Bibijan's land. She sold it with a

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deed to the two brothers, and then with the money thus earned went to Jibanpur to start a new life. Motaleb Mondal, the old friend of Ajgar Ali, came and took her with him to Jibanpur.

Sitting on the earthen veranda of his hut, Matin saw Bibijan going to Jibanpur, with her baby daughter in arms. The mango trees were in bud and the neem trees were in blossom. All the odours of the morning followed Bibijan's footsteps. She just threw back a glance as she walked on.

Motaleb who had long planned to marry Bibijan went to Ajgar Ali's place for this purpose. But it was Kalu Mian who superseded him. Motaleb had to wait till the burial of Kalu.

III

At night Achha Mian thought, 'Has the sister-in-law taken the deed with her?'

Matin thought as much, 'Maybe Bhabi has not handed over the deed.'

Achha called out, 'Matin, do you hear me?'

Matin said, 'Yes, I was also going to speak to you.'

They both began to ruminate. Did Bibijan give them the deed? No, she kept it with her after registration. Did they ask for it? Perhaps they did not.

But Bibijan should have handed it over to them, when she went with Motaleb. Of course, one did not know why people who lived on the land cared for document when lands could be sold without such formalities?

The two brothers fell silent. Matin shuddered at the thought that Bibijan might have taken the deed with her. Did she want Matin to go to her for the deed? His heart jumped at the idea. He could see Bibijan standing before him like a fairy with a white skin. She knew that Matin wanted to marry her, but his hopes were not fulfilled. At last she did what a woman of her age could not resist—she went away with Motaleb who was hovering around.

Bibijan was sure to marry Motaleb after Ajgar's death, but Kalu appeared, just in time. After Kalu's death it was Motaleb's turn to put in his claim.

Matin recalled vividly Motaleb walking in a skyblue *jobba,* tall and fiendish, every feature in his face reflecting his cunning. He looked like a butcher in a different sense, followed by Bibijan who looked like a flower. She walked with her one-year-old child by Kalu Mondal in arms and a bundle held by her hand. Was the deed inside the

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bundle, or was it for this that Motaleb thought of going to her?

'How many years ago did Bibijan leave us?' asked Matin.

— 'Five years ago I think, when your son and mine were about to be born.'

Achha was so intelligent. How quickly he had made all the calculations, and how quickly time flew. Matin thought he had made a great blunder by acting as a guard for Haidar Ali's gambling circle. Otherwise he could have gone to Bibijan while searching for the deed.

Matin muttered, 'One has to sell the land at any rate.'

With a gloomy expression Achha answered, 'How could we live if we do not sell the land?'

Matin said, 'Then we must go to Bhabi.'

Achha nodded, 'Yes, let us go.'

IV

Where was Jibanpur? It was in the south on the other side of the river Bidyadhari. Like twins Harowa lay on both sides of the river.

Ajgar Ali lived at Harowa. Jibanpur was five miles down. One could get there by boat or on foot across the river.

The twin brothers set out early in the morning. They had the same face, same eyes with this difference that Matin wore a khaki shirt over his *lungi* and a worn-out shawl thrown around his shoulders and Achha was dressed in a creased faded pink *Punjabi*. They were out to get back the deed. If they failed they would simply perish in drought this year.

The morning fog had engulfed the whole world. When Matin walked ahead Achha could not see him in the dense fog. Matin was not even aware of Achha's presence, he was so absorbed in his search for Bibijan in the fog. Yes, she was there, and Matin could not take his eyes off her.

They were drenched in the bluish mist, their bodies feeling damp. Matin observed how the blend of blue and grey deepened all around. They arrived at Devalaya from where the pitch-coated road ran along the bank of Bidyadhari river until it ends at Pirgorachand's *Majar*.

On the way Matin asked, 'D'you know where Motaleb Mian lives?'

'We can ask about it at the next *mouja*.'

The bus service had stopped, so the two brothers took a rickshaw. Though they could see clearly a park off the road in front of them. There was a curtain of mist only a few steps ahead. The twins realized that they were again and again passing from an area of blue to one of grey, as the three-wheeled rickshaw-van sped along.

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Matin wondered when they would reach Jibanpur. What a surprise it would be for Bibijan! Achha was thinking of how soon he could get hold of the deed.

Shivering with cold and cronching in the rickshaw the twins at last reached the bank of river Bidyadhari. Matin was surprised to see how quickly the fog was clearing, as the sunlight fell on the river and the fields. The sun in early Aghran looked like molten gold—a pool of gold in which the birds were enjoying a swim.

They were held up here, as they had to wait for a boat. Hours passed by. The river was just at tide, and the journey against it was rather a hard job. Matin wanted to walk on foot—along the river embankment, then across the *ghat* at Jibanpur, but he could not.

As they approached Jibanpur on a boat against the tide, the sun was about to set. Matin almost heard his heartbeats. He could waste no more time as he had already wasted so many years of his life. So no more delay at Jibanpur. He had no idea that Bibijan with her deed at Jibanpur would be calling him for so many years.

Getting down from the boat Achha asked, 'Matin, can we get our meal here?'

It was as if Matin knew the place as well as his home, so he laughed, 'How should I know? I don't live here, do I?'

The two brothers shared a laugh over this. They knew how to suppress their hunger. The *pantha* they had eaten in the morning would not make them feel hungry till the evening.

Walking a few steps they asked a peasant, 'D'you know where Motaleb Mian lives?'

The fellow was piling up the paddy just brought from the field. There was no one around. He was startled to see the twins. He really could not believe his eyes. Did he see double? Shaking off his sense of amazement, he saw that there were before him two separate human beings, looking alike, but dressed differently. After scanning them thoroughly, he asked, 'Which Motaleb?'

'There was', said Achha, 'a butcher called Ajgar Ali, Motaleb was his friend.'

Matin added, 'Bibijan was his wife. She was first Ajgar Ali's wife; then she married my elder brother, Kalu ...'

That was enough for the peasant who nodded and said before Matin could finish, 'I see. Please keep straight on until you reach the Aswath tree, then turn left, and there is Motaleb's house right in front of you.'

The two brothers broke into a run. With the river behind them, they passed from the sunny area into the shadows. It was so dark

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under the Aswath tree that it seemed that the sun had always passed it by. Standing in the shade of the tree they felt so cold that their hair stood on end. Matin's heart beat faster, and he put his hand on the left side of his chest. Then they both saw Motaleb's mud house which looked so unkempt.

There were holes in the courtyard which had not had a coat of cowdung paste for a long time. The straws on the roof were not correctly placed. In a corner plot lintel and mustard carelessly grown and piled up displayed a blend of yellow and green. In another corner there was a pile of paddy looking equally disorderly.

Achha was shocked to see how one could afford to be so indifferent to his own land. If Achha had a plot like this, or if he had kept the one he had owned, he could have shown how brilliant the colour of mustard could be.

Achha called out, 'Bibijan.'

Matin held his breath.

Achha shouted once again, 'Motaleb Mian.'

A frail man was just putting down a bundle of paddy from his head. He was behind the house when they arrived. This was Motaleb Mian.

On his way from the cornfield Motaleb saw the two men walking up and down in front of the mustard-field. He put down the bundle of paddy and came forward flicking the straws off his body with a *gamcha.*

'Oh, God, they are so alike, who are they?' Motaleb kept staring at them for sometime. Achha and Matin also kept gazing at this skin-and-bone figure with two sunken eyes—eyeballs almost invisible—and with white hair and beard, a sign of premature aging. He looked like a twisted bamboo. When he was walking everything inside his chest was throbbing with its rapid rise and fall and the skin on the bones was on the point of cracking.

'Who are you?' Motaleb came up to them.

The twins were greatly shocked. Was this the same Motaleb? He was so huge, like a monster, wearing a sky-blue *punjabi.* There was nothing in common between the Motaleb they knew and the Motaleb who was standing before them. The two Motalebs were as much different as the two brothers were alike.

—'Can you recognise us? We're the two younger brothers of Kalu Mondal, your wife Bibijan's previous husband.'

Motaleb's whole body tensed. He sat down, threw the *gamcha* around the shoulders, and gave them a blank look.

'Yes, what's the matter?'

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'We want to see Bhabi, it is about the deed. Would you please ask her to come out?'

Motaleb could not hear it all. Matin showed more courage.

'Motaleb Bhai, what made you change so much? You're a wreck, I see.'

Motaleb took a breath after sometime, 'I've been suffering from Malaria since the month of Baishakh. It is almost a year now. I've a temperature off and on. I'm going to have it just now, you see how I'm shivering. I'm sure it will kill me one of these days.

Matin wrapped his shawl around Motaleb's kneck, and held him tightly. Motaleb's whole body was shivering.

'You go in, Mian', said Achha, 'We can help you if you can show your land.'

Motaleb said slowly, 'It's just behind the hut.'

Matin said in whisper, 'Please ask Bibijan to give me some water, I feel so thirsty.'

Shivering with fever, Motaleb said with difficulty, 'So you've come to see her. Others also came. But she is not here.'

'Oh, isn't she here?' Matin almost screamed.

'She has left me. She has married again.'

Matin almost sank to the ground and heard Motaleb panting. Achha ran towards the cornfield.

After a while Matin whispered, 'When did she leave you?'

'It's almost a year now, in Baishakh, when I fell ill.'

'So you've divorced her,' Matin's voice expressed disappointment.

Motaleb remained silent for a long time and then said in a panting voice, 'I didn't divorce her. She was so beautiful, you see. How could I keep her to myself? She has gone to live with Majarul Haque of Patkelghata and taken with her Kalu's child and two of mine. Haque sahib is a big shot, owns so much property. He met her at a fair at Harowa.

They stayed the night at Motaleb's place. He had not married again, as the empty decaying interior of his house was a clear indication. They went in, as it was so cold outside.

In the evening Achha disclosed the purpose of their visit. The ailing Motaleb jumped at the idea. He gave Bibijan two *bighas* of land as a marital gift.

Where was the deed of the land? Motaleb could not let her have it after divorce. He searched for it, but there was no sign of it. He turned over all his boxes, but he did not find it. Then Matin said, 'Bibijan must have taken it with her. She probably wanted you to go to her to get it back.'

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Motaleb had his face in his hands, and said in a choked voice, 'Maybe you're right. I was not in my senses when I was down with fever.'

V

The twins decided at night they would go to Patkelghata. The ailing Motaleb also wished to go with them.

'But you're so ill,' said Achha.

'I'll be all right in the morning.'

Matin could not have a wink of sleep throughout the night. He thought he could have taken Bibijan with him if he had come to her in Chaitra or Baishakh. Now he would have to go to Majarul Haque. Another long waiting!

In the morning Motaleb had remission of fever with perspiration. He locked the door of his house and went out with the twins. He was so weak that he could not walk with steady steps. He observed on the way, 'Bibijan cannot stick with anyone for long.' Achha only thought of how he could get hold of the deed and then sell his land. It was a pity that they had to sell their land. If they bought it, the next day they would certainly sell it, and the richfolk were always ready to buy it.

Matin asked, 'Can't we reach Patkelghata before sundown?'

Motaleb shook his head, 'No. It is quite a long way. It would be dark when we get there.'

Suddenly Motaleb Mondal stopped walking, and asked, 'Now tell me which of you is which?'

'What do you mean?' Matin stopped, too.

'Who is Achha Mian?'

Achha came forward and touching his chest said, 'It's me.'

'Bibijan talked so much about you.'

Matin felt shattered, and walked with eyes bent on the ground. What was Motaleb Mian driving at? Was it really true? Did Bibijan know which of them was Achha and which one was Matin? Didn't she mistake him for Achha? He walked on with weary melancholy steps, towards Patkelghata, his face losing its natural look.

Three men were walking—the bony Motaleb blanked with two look-alikes. How far was Bibijan? She had got so many people's various assets in her custody, peasant's land as well as peasant's heart. The number of people increased with the search for this—from two to three, three to four until the villages looked deserted. □

Translated from Bengali by Dipendu Chakrabarti

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SIN

Afsar Ahmed

SHE came and stood again beneath the pawpaw tree. The tree was just a step off the courtyard near a runnel under the roof. Next to it was a lime tree. A brood of hens were picking at the wet ground. The chicks twittered. A soft darkness swiftly enveloped the pawpaw tree. Over the paved space before the outer room a sheet of tarpaulin was being hung. A scaffolding had been erected by a border of bamboo driven into the sides. A canopy was being made with the heavy tarpaulin. Below, the carpet for seating was being laid out. Two, three, four, six pillows. Two bolsters among them. All the sheets and pillows from the bedrooms have been brought out today. A *milad-mehfil* at Zainuddin Kazi's. A Maulana is coming from Calcutta. There will be a lot of people, the paved yard will teem with them. The praise of the Prophet, the *Darud Sharif*, will be read aloud. Through the openings in the carved pawpaw leaves the fireflies, within reach a moment ago, rose towards the sky. The sky is so vast. So high. The seven-layered sky. No one can go there. They say that Allah lives there. Allah is everywhere. Within the heart too is his home.

The darkness thickened and congealed. Only the fireflies sliced through the black layers to shoot away in different directions. The pawpaw and lime trees sank into the dark. Somehow, Farida's body too was lost. It seemed she could not find herself. A lantern was lit. Light burst forth. The fireflies vanished.

As a tall shadow moved away, Farida asked in a low voice, "Who is it?"

"Is it you, Farida? Rashid here. I didn't see you." The shadow approached.

"Why are you coming closer?"

"I'd better see your face, whether you are really Farida."

"What a way to look!"

"Will you give me a glass of water?"

"Get lost!"

Just then Malek's mother could be heard bawling, "Farida—Farida!"

Farida seemed to find wings on her feet. She stopped only in front of the kitchen. Malek's mother had taken off her *kurta* and was fanning herself. Her face was stippled with sweat. Black moss-stains on a white face. She let down her bulk on the ground with a thump.

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The silver band round her waist glittered in the light of the lantern. "Went off for a spin, you slut? And here I am trying to cope. Only sixteen, and hot tides in the blood already!"

Malek's mother will go on now. Over and over in the same vein. Farida shrank into her own shadow.

A whole lot of pots and pans had to be cleaned. Farida clanged the vessels into a pile one by one. She shifted the wood under the pot of rice on the oven. There was a small kerosene lamp burning nearby, she lit another and went out by the back door. She wound her way down a tussock. Reaching the bank she sat scouring the pots and pans noisily. A whisk from her sari doused the lamp. The fireflies were back again, glinting like the silver belt of the Kazi's wife.

Sullen and unhappy, Farida suddenly tied a firefly into her sari like securing a gold coin and threw the end of the sari over her shoulder as if it held a bunch of keys. A bunch of keys over her shoulder at last. The smart she felt was real. Farida has tied the household keys into the end of her sari and thrown the bunch heavily over her shoulder. Farida is mistress of a household. Someone's wife. Such women scour vessels too. They do the work of the house.

A sharp fishbone was pricking Farida's finger. She can hold a pen with this finger and sign her name. Farida Khatun, father's name Mohammad Yusuf Ali, address Amragari—all this written up from time to time as handwriting practice. The second master's stick in class three whirls overhead. The bamboo pen scratches out handwriting to show him. Below she spells out Fa-ri-da Kha-tu-n letter by letter. She hasn't forgotten the spelling of her name. She can dash off her father's name, her own name and her address without a mistake. The Kazisaheb's third daughter had written "Sobina" instead of "Sabina" when prospective in-laws came to see her. Simply a matter of an "a". But what an error! Nothing came out of that. She was married elsewhere.

They will come to see Farida from a far country. She can't afford to make a mistake when displaying her handwriting.

After the wedding, when the in-laws view the bride, she should keep her eyes shut. It looks bad if someone makes her laugh.

Cooking is no problem. And she learnt to weave vests, bamboo baskets big and small, long ago. If she had wool she could have learnt knitting. It's easy, leave one, pick one. Suppose they ask when they come to see her? She would have all the answers pat. If they say, a bump on the face—*ab*, a jewel for the ear—*dul*, mother says eat—*kha*, father says write—*lekh*, what does that make? This riddle is oral—"Abdul Khalek". Suppose the groom's name is Abdul Khalek?

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The eldest son of Zainuddin Kazi is called Kazi Abdul Malek. Much the same, Khalek and Malek. Just an "m" in place of "kh". She had pricked out this name on his handkerchief with a gold-tipped needle. Suppose the groom looks like Malek? Silly, all lies. Does anyone ever look like someone else?

On her left palm she had drawn the symbolic moon and star with *mehendi* paste. May her wedding date be fixed before the *mehendi* fades. Everything she did now had this wish behind it. She had not told anyone.

Mother says that in your in-laws' house you mustn't speak loudly. A woman's voice should not be heard from one room to another.

She talks loudly, hence the caution. But she couldn't care less for other people. Nobody keeps her. She eats only because she works hard.

A pebble dropped in front of Farida. There was a sound in the water. Ripples were set up. Water splashed her face and eyes.She was dazzled by the glare of an electric light. "Hey you worthless oaf!"

The light moved about in her eyes. The shadows of the trees swayed. Tearing apart the shadows the ray of light found its target in Farida's eyes. The light kept approaching. It set Farida quivering. There was a thumping in her breast. The line of light began to contract. Closer now. Shorter, still shorter. The light came very close and stopped.

"Are the vessels done?"

"Malekbhai?"

"Yes. The guests have come. You're late, so mother sent me to get you."

"I'm just done," Farida gathered up the pots and pans. "Has the Maulana from Calcutta come?"

"Yes, from Metiaburuj."

Malek's light wandered. Farida moved ahead. Malek followed her. Malek tripped and stumbled against her.

"You're not hurt, Malekbhai?"

"No."

"Then let's go."

Like the light, her mind too shot in different directions.

Malek has passed exams. He will marry into a good family. It wasn't an offence if he fell on top of you. Now if she had stumbled, it would have been an offence. A vibration, like the touch on a string, turned Farida into a string herself. She felt a sort of timidity. At the same time, a restless darting about, like the electric light.

The Kazi's wife was mincing chicken. The silver waistband glit-

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tered in the light. "Our guest the Maulana is here. What were you doing at the pond? Who's going to serve him *paan-sherbet*?"

Farida hurried in to make the sweet drink. The Maulana's roll of betel and sweet drink were special. She placed a glass of plain water and another of coloured *sherbet* with saffron on a dish. She covered them with bamboo covercles.

"Khala!"

She called the Kazi's wife Khala, aunt. "Khala, the *sherbet* is ready."

"Malek—Malek, where's Malek now! Go on, you go and serve it."

Farida approached the outer room with the glasses. There was light there. She was scared to go before the Maulana. If she could see Malek, she would hand over the glasses to him. She came to a stop at the threshold of the room. But Malek was not to be seen. She turned cold with fear. Outside, in the paved space, they were laying the carpet carefully, lighting another lantern. There were a lot of people about. They were making a bed for the Maulana to sit on. Six pillows, two bolsters. With a quaking heart Farida peeped into the room. The Maulana sat alone on the bed there. Mustering courage, Farida went in with the glasses. There were two lanterns burning outside. Two, three, four, six pillows. Two bolsters. Again it is like the light in Malek's hand roaming over her body. Malek falling headlong against her body. Her body is a shiver of strings. Farida trembles all over. The winking firefly tied in her sari seems to be pulsating between her eyes. A touch is enough to set up vibrations.

Still shaking, Farida came out of the room. Rashid came and stood before her.

"Do you know, Farida, I've sent my wife back to her house."

"So what?"

"I'll write breaking it off."

"And then?"

"Then?"

"Yes, then?"

Farida slopped Rashid's face with the left-over water from the Maulana's glass and returned to the kitchen. She seethed in anger. Walking round and round the kitchen she kept touching things haphazardly.

She began to make savoury pancakes for the Maulana. She was pouring with sweat. Beads of moisture covered her face. She fried eggs and potatoes.

Zainuddin Kazi entered the inner quarters. A few women, relatives by marriage, came in too. Malek's mother left the kitchen to

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join them. They hugged and kissed one another.

The Kazi roared, "Farida."

She seemed to sweat the more. "*Ji*, what is it?"

"Give me a glass of water."

The Kazi's wife was fanning her husband instead of fanning the guests.

"When did the Maulana arrive?" inquired the grave Kazisaheb.

"Just a while ago."

"Did you give him *paan-sherbet*?"

"Of course."

"Refreshments?"

"Fari is making pancakes with eggs and potatoes."

Farida took a glass of water to Zainuddin Kazi. The Kazisaheb was airing his long beard. Meanwhile the eggs were beginning to sizzle. The Kazi took his time over the glass of water. Farida went in to arrange the food.

Kazisaheb gave a shout, "Malek, Malek! Where's Malek?"

Malek came running. "What is it, father?"

"The Maulana is waiting, and you haven't served refreshments yet? Where's your breeding? If the Maulana is displeased in the Kazi's household, it is nothing to be proud of."

Malek entered the kitchen as meek as a wet cat. Farida handed him the Maulana's food. With a little cuff on her head, Malek went out.

Farida fidgeted with the burning wood in the oven.

Catering to different demands and cooking numerous dishes left Farida breathless. The pores in her skin let in the heat of the oven. She loosened her mass of hair. She held her body at an angle. But the heat got her from every side. A pebble in the pond. Malek stumbling against her. The Maulana in the outer chamber. Rashid writing to his wife for a break-up. And then! Yes, then!

A religious assembly at the Kazi's house today—*milad-mehfil*. The village folk are congregating. Boys, young men, old men are arriving in crowds. The women are coming straight through to the inner quarters. The Kazi's wife has settled down with them to a cozy session of *paan* — betel leaves and nuts. The gathering for the *mehfil* is warming up. Zainuddin Kazi, in clothes proper to the occasion and his status, head covered in a cap, *attar* on his ear-lobes, *surma* in his eyes, passed by, reciting some words in Arabic. The confident rap of the stick in his hand could be heard long after.

A black cat sprang on to a pot in the kitchen. Farida screamed, "Oh, help!" She recoiled in fright. Terrors. So many terrors. Terror

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of ghosts. Terror of djinns. Terror of the body. For the body has vice in basketfuls. The body must not be given free rein. It would be wickedness. Sin.

The *milad* gathering had settled. The Maulana was conducting it. Her jobs done. Farida breathed again.

In the room she raised the lamp to look in the mirror. She looked fearsome. Her hair was all over her face. She passed her comb through it. She put a dot of red *kumkum* on her forehead and coaxed her clothes into order.

She returned to the pawpaw tree near the yard. Some light from the lanterns reached it. The lime tree moved in the breeze. Slowly she advanced along the thread of light. The Maulana was perorating. Pious men, their heads covered, had all sat down. Malek's mother had settled down comfortably with her relatives and neighbours on a mat just outside the rooms. A sari had been hung as a screen before them. The male Maulana could not see them, nor could they see him. But they could hear his sermon. To hear it was good for the soul.

Now the women's gathering had warmed up. Jamal's mother, a neighbour, said to Malek's mother with a nudge, "What about marrying off your son?"

"I will, I will. Look around for a bride. She must be pretty though."

"What will you do with beauty, woman? Shouldn't you look for virtue?"

Khurshid's mother, struggling to hold back the betel juice in her mouth, said indistinctly, "Johur's wife finally walked out on him yesterday."

Malek's mother said, "Come, cousin, I hadn't heard of that."

"Oh, there's nothing new. The Mollapara couple's shindigs are an old story. Johur wasn't to his wife's liking. Such scenes in the room with that unmarried fellow, Haroun!"

"Shame! Shame!" Malek's mother slapped her own cheeks.

"That female needs a husky male. One day Johur came across them."

"Didn't he do anything?" asked Jamal's mother.

"What could he do, that eunuch? Came bleating after his wife, I suppose. She says up, and he ups, she says sit, and he sits."

"Shame, shame! And what sort of fellow is this Haroun, chasing someone else's wife?"

"Haroun's is quite a tale—a two-hundred rupee fine the last time, nose in the dust, shoes on head, and he's at it again."

Malek's mother's earrings swung gently. She had a jewelled stone

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on her nostril and a silver amulet on her armband. Popping another roll of betel into her cheek, she spoke while munching, her nostrils dilated in confidence, "There's no soberer boy than my Malek, never turns to look at women, always says, there's family honour to be thought of. His grandfather was so respected, people from all around came to him for big decisions. Malek never speaks up before his father. His father said, do your prayers five times, my son. From the very next day the dear child doesn't once forget his prayers and fasts. If he's caught shirking his father will bury him straight off."

"True, true. Today's youngsters wouldn't be able to say a word before Malek's father. They would piss all over the place," Jamal's mother is all agreement.

Meanwhile, the Maulana was declaiming. A bolster to his right, one to his left, and a pillow dented by elbows on his cross-legged lap. Two, three, four, six pillows. A lantern on either side hung from the bamboo frame for the tarpaulin. Swarms of insects were rushing in from the underbrush to congregate. Every time the Maulana's melodious recitation reached the seventh note, his right palm rose towards his left ear. He had a brown wart on his left cheek. The deep black mass of his beard had been streaked with *mehendi*. Above the sleeve of his long blue shirt was an embroidered white *dupatta*. His eyes were outlined in *surma*. He discoursed in honeyed tones. He quoted profusely from sacred texts and exhorted his audience to follow the rules which would keep them on the path of righteousness.

There was a rose spray. Rose water was being sprinkled from time to time. Then the boys would fall over one another. Crowds of old men and youngsters with covered heads had gathered around. Every time the assembly grew dozy, the Maulana led a loud chorus from the *Darud Sharif: "Allahuma, Salleyalla, Saiyadana, Safiyana, Maulayana, Mohammad ..."*

The unwavering line of torchlight was advancing towards Farida. She sank down with her back against the wall. The light fell on her eyes. The searching ray approached in probing circles—the roseapple tree, the banana grove, and then this way. It seemed that the light drove a certain urge before it. Suddenly Farida felt herself hanging by a thread between desire and aversion. She caught sparks from the collision of dread and allure. Who comes? Who is it? Malekbhai. Seeking, searching, came the light in Malekbhai's hand. The roving eye of light will make a tumult in the body. Farida sways, this way and that. Her sari seemed to rustle down. A carnival in the blood, dancing, a frenzied delving in the heart. The beam of light had a breathtaking speed. It became shorter. She was now within its circle.

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"Is it Malekbhai?"

"Yes, I was looking for you."

"Why?"

"Just looking."

"Why?"

"Just looking. Okay, give me the matches."

Inwardly, Farida burst into laughter. Was that all Malekbhai came to say? And her heart had quaked. If this was all! What else could there be? Nothing, of course, nothing at all. There was nothing he could say to Farida. A girl's—a woman's life. After a spell of inner laughter, Farida ran. As she raced to the kitchen, her dragging sari drew out of the darkness a sound of intimate whispers and hushed laughs. She returned, trying to put the sari-end back in place Malekbhai had followed her.

"Here you are, rich man's son-in-law."

Malek struck a match and lit a *bidi*. "Mother can't see, can she?"

"Khala is enjoying herself with her kinswomen."

"So she can't see?"

"No, no."

Why was Farida sweating? Surely it wasn't the heat from Malek's *bidi*! No, Malek stood smoking in the dark. Farida watched him smoke. Pull in. Blow out.

The Maulana was sermonizing: "Brothers, we no longer keep to the ways of Islam. We have forgotten our *namaz-roja,* our *haj-hakat*, we do not eat *halal* food, we eat impurities. We have become dishonest; fraud, injustice, promiscuity, are common among us. Such sinful mortals will have to burn in the fires of hell after the final judgment ..."

"Malekbhai, no, it's nothing."

"Want to say something?"

"I've forgotten."

Malek seemed to hiss in laughter.

Instantly the Maulana's smile in the outer room came back to gnaw at Farida's breast. So they are good people. The Maulana knows such a lot. He couldn't be called bad. He has read piles of Arabic books. You couldn't even go before such an important man. Massive beard. Voice like a tiger's. She had stood trembling at the door with the glasses. The Maulana was sitting cross-legged on the plank bed in the room. A lamp burnt weakly. There was a flood of lantern light outside. The tarpaulin was being hung. The carpet was being laid out. One, two, four, six pillows. Two bolsters. Farida entering with the *paan-sherbet*. Trembling all over. Lips pressed together. Nostrils

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quivering.

"What's your name?" She had lost her voice.

"You're a pretty girl, lovely." She dissolved in trembles.

"Let me see your palm."

Was this the way to read a palm? Was it? ... that bearded fellow ... no, drop it. Oh yes, that fellow knows a lot. How to tuck a hand inside another. She didn't know. How a moist snaky hand gives off electric sparks as it roams about for a cuddle.

So what if there were no anklets round her feet? And if she had no silver bangles? No jewelled stone on her nostril? Wicked, wicked, wicked. Sin, sin, sin.

Name, Farida Khatun, father's name, Yusuf Ali, address Amragari ... They will come to see me. Fa-ri-da Kha-tu-n. Riddle—*ab* on the face, *dul* in the ear, mother says *kha,* father says *lekh* ...

"Malekbhai."

"Come on, what's on your mind?"

"I keep forgetting."

"Tell me."

"How late is it?"

"One o'clock."

"Won't the moon come up?"

"It's set."

"Will the *milad* go on?"

"All night."

Pulling on his *bidi,* Malek came up closer to Farida. The body seemed to melt like wax in flames.

"Malekbhai, wouldn't it be sin?" whispered Farida.

"Nonsense, those are all lies."

"But the Maulana's speech?"

Malek pulled hard at his *bidi* and blew the smoke into Farida's face. And embracing Malek, Farida grew into a sculpture of love in the dark.

Suddenly a confused uproar was heard from the meeting place. The Maulana's voice had fallen silent. Only a lot of noisy rushing about.

Zainuddin Kazi thundered, "Malek, Malek!"

Farida stood motionless. Erupting from the carved stillness, Malek ran.

Step by step, Farida approached the corner of the outer room, behind the shelter of the pawpaw tree. She could see the Maulana rolling on the mattress.

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Tapping his stick, Zainuddin Kazi entered the inner courtyard. The tall man's head brushed a tile of the overhang. Muttering angrily, he stepped on to the paved space. "Who did this?"

His wife pulled the free end of her sari over her head. "What's wrong?"

"Our name, our honour, everything is lost, Malek's mother."

"Why don't you say what's wrong?"

"There was a needle in the pillow. The Maulana's breast ..."

Farida stood under the pawpaw tree, unmoving, silent. No one could see her in the darkness. But they will find her alright. The guilty one must be found. And then? In a sort of fearlessness and strange joy, she tried to stand up straight, but the end of the day had left her a tiny, shrunken figure. Now, in the dark, she waited for another call, with her hand on her breast, counting one, two, three ...

□

Translated from Bengali by Bhaswati Chakravorty

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THE MUSICIAN

Subrata Mukhopadhyaya

SOME find the way and, again, some don't. Be there never such a rover, he must have the wayfarer's heart. A craving for the distance. And an immense pair of feet. Only then, after much travelling, does the way become plain at last, its twists and turns, ruts and ditches begin to show, its shape and secret become familiar.

Sripati, the music master, can distinctly recall that the last time, when he got off at Rasa station from the first train for Palasthali, it was already evening. There were two roads. One going east and one going west. He went eastward.

That was two years ago. Since then, the region had been racked by flood and famine, and no call had come. It was parched again this year, but it wasn't like the end of the world. So word came once again for Sripati, the musician of Ilambazar. It was a summons by postcard, "Come over, master, we've brought out the instruments." Not a great many words, but there was a hidden strength in the call. Somewhat like the waters stealing under the bed of the Sal river in the height of summer. Water clear as glass the moment the sand is scratched. Coolness quenching the soul. There was no time to be lost. After the ritual obeisance at the homestead and at his mother's feet, Sripati set off, like last time. He had asked his brother to look after the grocery shop till he returned.

It was dusk last time too. Exactly three people had alighted from the train. The first two started walking westward at once. There remained only an old man. He too strode ahead at a young man's speed. The musician, almost forty, could hardly catch up, not as long as he moved at this hare's pace. After a while, he managed to pull even with long strides.

"Which way should I take for Penchalia, sir?"

Lifting the stick under his arm on to his shoulder, the old man said, "Straight on. Then south."

"Right."

"Got to cross the Waylost Plain first. Then straight on, just follow your nose."

What the old man said after that turned the blood cold. A stranger new to the Waylost Plain invariably lost his way. A bare plain. No settlements anywhere, before or beyond. It takes quite a while to cross. People usually have some sense of direction. But if that sense

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goes wrong, one must look at the heavens. One has to see if the star there is steady or flickering. That is the Wayloser's Star which makes one lose the way and then find it again. If you see that the star is flickering you've had it, mister. However long you walk the night will never end. All night you will go round and round in the waylosing maze. So what should one do then? Surely, there must be a way out. The old man walked up to a crossing of three roads and stopped. Pointing towards the right he said, "Straight on."

Sripati realized that the old man was going a different way. He persisted almost with desperation, "What am I to do if waylosing catches me?"

The old man took the stick from his shoulder and tucked it under his arm, cupped his right hand before his eyes and said, "Splash your eyes three times with piss. Even the ghost of waylosing will run for his life."

It was clear that waylosing was such a hideous thing that one needed a hideous spell to be rid of it.

The man went down the declining path on the left into the thickening darkness. The soil of Bengal west of the Ganges is a tricky shade of red, it turns black in the dark. The path dipped towards the far horizon. Sripati heard the man's stick rhythmically hitting the rough surface, which meant it was no longer under his arm. Without further ado he turned south. The plain after a little while, and the boundary of Penchalia beyond. As long as the clarinet in his sling-bag was tuned, there was no worry. If he saw trouble, he would blow on it with all the air in his chest. The musicians in Penchalia would know that their teacher was coming. Perhaps a cornet would answer from the other side, "Come, friend of my soul, my heart yearns to see you."

The song, however, never reached voice or flute. Fear alone would bring it out. At last Sripati came to a point where the road to the south trailed off. Or, perhaps, where it joined a vast expanse the whole of which was now one big way, a path without margins. To go on, he would have to foot out a track for himself. A yawning darkness waited ahead, stretched across the way. "Come on, wayfarer," it seemed to say, "climb down or just plunge in." The music master hesitated, wondering if he should go back. But can one turn back just like that? The man who had brought the message to Ilambazar had repeatedly said that the musicians of Penchalia would be waiting for him. The wedding season was now close. There would be other festivities as well. The players would learn new melodies from the master, and would then carry the tunes to the joyous crowds in people's courtyards. They would earn a little silver too, to help them

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fill their stomachs. One could not deprive them of this little.

Sripati was no longer unnerved by the darkness massed in front. He could only see the lean anxious faces of the musicians of Penchalia. During the day, he knew, they were bonded labourers, slaving on the fields, shoving the ploughs till the life-blood frothed at their mouths. And at night those hands held the flute and beat the drums, and their voices overflowed with melody. Barebodied in the morning, they furrowed and delved the mud to give it life. And at night these same men, now in red turbans, would gather to plot another birth. The magic flute quickened both forms of life. In the morning they played the angled flute, and at night the straight one. And who makes the music? The maker is always the same—in the sinuous, dusky player of the divine flute, and in the dark-skinned, yoke-shouldered players of Penchalia.

Sripati walked on, from the path to the plain. The barren ground had the soul of stone. Occasional little kingdoms of grass. For the rest, only clumps of thornbrush. However dark the night, this kind of plain has its own peculiar glow. It comes from the starlight which splinters up from the hard ground in the effort to pierce it. And there is the faint reflection from lamps and lanterns of cottages and pavilions in faraway villages. That light touches the sal wood and spreads over the tops of the distant rows of palms. Like a haze, its muted glimmer covers the emptiness of the world. Clinging to the bare surface of the plain, Sripati saw this enchantment of mingled dark and light, now inseparably one.

As he trudged along, he gained some inkling of the way. He had heard that people found their way on the pathless sea with the help of some sort of a pointing machine. This tract was no different. There was no hint of a landmark anywhere. Only the palms visible at a far margin signalled perhaps a waterhole in the grove. Some reason to take heart. Unconsciously, Sripati's sights shifted. A little to the left. The next moment it seemed as though there was someone walking ahead of him, keeping a distance. Was it many lengths or only a few feet? Who was it? It must be someone, or was he seeing things? Sripati tried to focus his eyes. Yes, sure, someone was walking along ahead. But the gait was not straight. Somehow unsteady, meandering. Walking on the plain at a brisk pace was a person blacker than the dark. The shape flitted like a wisp in the shadows and did not look back.

Although slightly nervous, Sripati did not falter. Instead he slapped his sandals noisily on the uneven ground as he walked. To provoke the figure into looking round, into talking. But no, only the bowed head lifted a little. All that the lambent sky showed clearly

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was a mess of unbound hair falling to the hips. The cascading tresses made a screen, like the painted frame behind a goddess, and hid the upper part of the figure from view. Her hair blew in the wild wind of late Chaitra, and the end of her sari fluttered. Who could it be? Surely, not an evil fairy? Could it be waiting to wring his neck, thirsting for an innocent musician's blood?

A faint perfume of flowers descended on the plain from the sal wood on the horizon. Overhead, a bird headed for the wood, beating its wings busily. Far away, on the boundary of the pool, the palm leaves crackled in the wind, Sripati coughed. "Who is it?"

The shadow stopped. So did Sripati. But the figure did not turn round. So something had to be said after this. Sripati called again, "Who is it?"

The second question had an effect. Slowly the shadow turned. The glow of darkness caught her dusky face. She smiled. Sripati was amazed. In the middle of nowhere, unmet, unknown, she smiles at a strange man. What sort of a girl was this? Could she be one of the loose sort? Or do witches tempt men like this? Something jumped inside his head. Would he have to spend the night trapped in the waylosing spell of this girl? Sripati swallowed. "I've lost my way."

At once the darkness swayed. She laughed out loud. She laughed, and slapped both her hands. The laughter drowned the crackling of palm leaves from the poolside. The violence of the Chaitra wind seemed tame. Sripati could feel the lonely plain waking from a slumber. The girl asked laughing, "You can't find the way?"

Sripati shook his head in the darkness. One query answered by another.

The girl advanced towards him slowly. The way that was open for him now seemed closed. But the eyes of the dusky girl held no fear of losing the way. Placing a finger on her breast, she whispered, "I live here."

What on earth was she saying? This full-blown woman live on this blank plain? Sripati said slowly, "That's fine, but ..."

"Yes?"

"How come you're wandering around alone after dark?"

"So what?"

Sripati realized it was no use talking to her. There were no straight answers. Besides, if someone found the music-master confabulating with this wild woman in the dark there would be no end of it. He gently eased past her. At once the voice followed him. "Where might you be going?"

"Penchalia," the master answered gravely. Then he started walk-

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ing, hugging the bag slung on his shoulder. She who had been a shadow all this time was now substance. Her conversation made clear she was no fairy, but human. But of what sort? Better not ponder the question now. What came to mind was the pointing machine which fixed directions on the sea. Should one ask the girl the way to Penchalia? Before turning round he heard the lines. "You pick flowers all night, dear flower-girl, but they never sell." A familiar song. The tune had been partly picked up from the record played on the mikes. It would come out well on the instrument. The music-master slowed down to listen. Although not trained, the voice was not untuned. But not for long. After singing that single phrase, she said, "Father will say the wench is wicked. Mother will say the hussy gads about in the woods and bushes. Strange, the whole world. All stony, like rocks."

Sripati listened to her talking, almost lost in herself. It was difficult to make sense of what she said. Before he could work out how such thoughts could come hard upon a night spent in picking flowers, the words came again. "I have no worries, thank you. Eat and sleep and roam around. Who can tell whose mind goes which way?"

Whose mind? Does she mean the musician's, or her own? Sripati stopped. Then lifting his hand, he said, "Walk ahead."

"What for? It's my home and I'll go as I like."

"Where is it?"

"Penchalia. Who can tell whose mind goes which way?"

What an impossible situation! This was a completely untethered female. He had been perfectly fine walking along by himself. Then he had to get himself into this mess by trying to talk. She won't go on ahead, instead would talk in riddles. Was this the manner of Penchalia? The witchery of the Waylost Plain would have been better. What spell would rid him of this spirit?

Quite a bit had been covered though, unnoticed. Looking back, it seemed about the middle of the plain. A glow from the village could be seen on the far sky. Ignoring the glow stood the sentinels of the sal wood, their heads in the sky. Trees never sleep. At night they meditate. They stand close to one another, yet acknowledge no bond. The dust was flying before the wind of Chaitra. With the dust against his face and eyes, Sripati made bold to ask, "What is your name?"

"Why? Why should you care for the name of another man's wife?"

Another catastrophe. She was married—a wife with a home and that too in the country! And she wandered about the plain at night! Of easy virtue perhaps, who could tell? The musician spoke in a hesitant voice, "It's nothing. Just asking."

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"Good. I'll tell you since you asked. My name is Manasha. The Bauris of Jhampratala are my in-laws."

"And your husband ...?"

"The fellow doesn't take me. He has Manasha's father's name, he used to eat off my father's earnings."

In other words, Shankar Bauri of Jhampratala lived with his in-laws. But why did he leave Manasha, what did she do?

"Why doesn't he take you?"

Manasha didn't bridle at Sripati's question. Instead she said in a sort of lost voice. "Who can tell whose mind goes which way?"

Back to the riddle. Changing the subject quickly, Sripati said, "And how far is Penchalia?"

Manasha was as abstracted as the plain. She went on to herself. "It is dark at dawn and again at night. I never can tell when day comes."

"Why?"

Manasha mimicked him. "Why! Like acting innocent, don't you? I'm sleepy, that's why."

"Right."

Sripati did not pursue this. He might trip if he was careless. So he walked with his head down. This was not just a mute plain, he thought as he walked. It had its words, its play of dark and light. One couldn't tell, of course, how this voice would sound under the clear daylight sky. This was just the story of the night. The view of the sky was broken by stars, by the edges of clouds. And here one's steps were broken by the ups and downs of the hard ground. And surely, meanwhile, the musician's sight had been beguiled. For the fragrance of the girl's hair mingled easily with the scent of the sal wood. The gusts of Chaitra played with Manasha'a locks. Her moving figure seemed to declare that this huge universe was not just stone. The winds played there and songs rang out.

Just as the plain now rose and now dipped, so did Manasha's speech. The moment one grasped a hint of the way, it was lost again in darkness. Thank the fate that the Wayloser's Star was still looking on steadily. "I can find no hint of the way, after all this time ...", Sripati hummed as he walked.

Upon coming close to Dompara four or five lanterns surged forward, tearing apart the darkness. Across the light, someone next to the unknown faces cried out, "The *ustad* has come."

The people broke into a noisy welcome. All around children scampered like young mice. Sripati saw that the roofs of the mud

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huts had been freshly thatched with straw. Someone brought out a wicker stool. Sripati sat down. He noticed the inquisitive gaze of a youth fixed on the sling-bag. Wondering what sorcery it held. An old man kept fanning him with a palm leaf. Just then a female voice screamed like a kite's inside the hut. "Slut, ditch-scum! The god of death has left you no shame! She's killing me, body and soul!"

Accompanied by Manasha's weeping. One couldn't follow the words for her sobs. What came through was that she could not tell whose mind went which way.

At Sripati's looking up, the old man said, "Manasha ... with you ...?"

Sripati nodded.

"Me, I am Srishtidhar. I am the father."

Sripati was on the stool. Three lanterns were lined in front of him. Beyond them, the bare-bodied, deep-coloured men, the musicians of Penchalia, were sitting in a circle. Behind them again was the crowd of boys and girls, looking at the master with wide-open eyes. How the oil gleamed on his long curled hair! He had a dhoti and a yellow shirt on. And you could guess the betel-stains on his teeth.

Now the piercing voice and its filthy swearing could be heard from inside the hut. With Manasha's howls and laments. Sripati was troubled by a vague sense of guilt. He looked up again into the eyes of the man fanning him. Srishtidhar said quickly, "She is not right in her head. My son-in-law has left her."

At last he could piece the picture together. After marrying Manasha, Shankar Bauri found she was unstable. He was comfortable in his in-law's house. During the day he would work for wages with Manasha's father and brothers on others' fields, and in the evening, tight with drink, he would listen to music. He did not touch the instruments. He had no rights there. Just as Bauri could never handle the musicians' instruments, so he could not, try as he might, ever really hold Manasha. Slowly he understood that Manasha's heart had no home. The whole day long she roamed under the trees at the waterhole, and turned towards the plain the moment night fell. All alone she strayed in the dark. The harshest beating would fail to tame her. Father and husband had drawn blood again and again. Manasha had rolled on the ground crying twice as hard. The blood from her lips had dyed the Dompara soil a deeper scarlet, yet she had not changed. Every night she fled, to a free, dreaming nature, a nature that answered hers. Shankar could not take this. Evil stirred in him. Driven by fury and jealousy the man found some peace by running away early one morning. Listening to Manasha's weeping

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Sripati thought that the spell of waylosing had left Shankar Bauri.

The musicians sat in a circle. Sripati had the stool in the centre. A slight breeze relieved the weariness of the journey. Now to business.

To Sripati's right sat Srishtidhar with a drum on his lap. On the left was Adhar with his cornet. In front of him were Mahadeb, Subal, Naren and the other players. They sat leaning against one another, each with an instrument. No one spoke. Somewhat like the silent row of sal trees seen from the plain. As if sitting in meditation. Sripati took out the flute from his bag and carefully wiped it with a corner of his shirt. The lantern lights slipped off its gleaming bell-metal ornaments. The musicians with their unoiled heads gazed at it with wonder, or were these the grave rows of sal trees beyond the far plain? Sripati looked up. A sliver of a moon had appeared like a crack in the sky. Like a wedge of milk-white coconut placed on a dish of betelnuts. Strange offering for a strange worship. A rite of silence, of waiting. The master touched the flute to his forehead before bringing it to his lips. At once he could hear the stream of notes from the crackling palm leaves at the grove. The lips touched the flute, they puckered, and then kissed with love. Instantly the air broke in waves: "You pick flowers all night, dear flower-girl, but they never sell."

Manasha was standing outside the reach of light. Her eyes were shut. Swaying gently the crazy girl listened to the flute.

Manasha was not seen again that night. Sripati's bed was made in a little room with a porch leading to the yard. Rice, both boiled and fermented, brought a heavy sleep the moment he lay down. He saw her next day by the pond.

The level of water had sunk in the wide pond. There was no sludge, and the sand and pebbles below were clearly visible. The smooth sand poured easily over a dipped foot. Sripati, sitting on a flat stone on the bank, was scouring his teeth with a neem twig. It was a pretty place in the daytime. On the other side were a few palms, with saplings and young ones, and three mango trees. Towards the west, by the steep pathway, a lone fig tree surged up at the sky. At the foot of the tree, a dove rested on a vermilion covered stone. Sripati bit on his twig and looked at the sky. A pleasant morning. Spring seemed to have paused at the point of leaving. That news was borne in the feel of the breeze. Lowering his head to rinse his mouth, he saw Manasha coming down by the path on the other side. Her drying cloth wrapped round her, stale clothes on her arm. On seeing Sripati, she stopped herself on the verge of a smile. She thought for a moment, then put down the clothes on the bank and walked along

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the edge to his side. Flinging the twig into the water, Sripati looked at her, "Well?"

"Thief."

"Where?"

"Before my eyes."

Clearly the epithet was meant for him. But why? Manasha looked at his eyes and said, "What are you looking so dumb for?"

"Humph."

"What humph?"

"I don't get your meaning."

"Of course not—the dog of the wilds lurks in the tiger's lair."

"Meaning?"

"Tricked me into singing my song. And now of course you're such an innocent."

Don't they say that laughter in the morning is cause for mourning? So, although fighting it back was painful, Sripati didn't laugh. Splashing the floating neem twig away from him, he said, "Is the song something you bought?"

Manasha suddenly drew herself straight, then thumped him unexpectedly on the back with her fist and replied, "Not bought, but known."

She wondered as she almost ran down the edge of the pond, "Who can tell whose mind goes which way?"

Sripati had strolled to the waterhole by the palms. The water level had gone down, as if to match the decline of the year in Chaitra. A pair of cormorants kept diving in and popping up. They looked around warily. Dived again. Sripati sat in the narrow space between two palm trees. He had no shirt on and the flute lay on his lap. He had just lit a *bidi* when his eyes fell on the cormorant couple. Eros had grown strong in them as in everything else in this season. They wooed each other, and could not let go. Sripati was reminded of the Purana stories he had heard in Kajipara. In his induction to the *Manashamangal,* the storyteller had related how Mahadeva himself had grown wild with desire at the sight of his daughter Manasha sporting in the water. Manasha realized that she had to calm her father's headstrong lust, or catastrophe would overcome the three worlds. She exhausted her wiles, but managed to cool him down at last. This Manasha's husband too was Shankar. No doubt he was a Bauri, but in reality he was Mahakaal. Is that why he could not cope with Manasha and had to run away? Sripati balked at these thoughts. He quickly turned his attention towards the pool. He saw the male

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prick his companion with his bill. She too pressed her bill against her mate's. The flute rang out. The player thrilled with an inner music.

On opening his eyes, he saw Manasha sitting at a distance. He had not noticed her arrive. Her hands were gathered on her lap. Her eyes tranquil, she was gazing silently at him. Still playing on the flute, Spripati smiled. But Manasha did not return the smile. Only her head swung gently. The musician played on, his heart anguished. Could the demented girl sense the message that gave life to the melody? But then, what would happen if she could? The flute plunged into silence. Then Shankar Bauri would not have left Penchalia. And Manasha would not have sat listening to the musician's flute in this seclusion. Manasha stopped swaying. "What's wrong?"

"Why?"

"Go on playing."

Sripati looked into the distance. His stay here would last another couple of days at the most. Then he would go back. Back to his buying and selling of groceries. His glance fell on the two cormorants. They were now close to ecstasy, emitting low sounds of pleasure and fluttering their wings in the water. He raised his eyes towards Manasha. So much neglect had left no shadows on her cheeks, no lines on her brow. Although her unoiled hair was full of tangles, the sunlight leaped off her cheeks. But the fine nostril was bare. It was pierced, yet the ornament was missing. A tiny jewel would have looked pretty on her. He called softly, "Manasha."

"Yes?"

"You ... you ..."

Manasha looked at the musician dreamily, "What is it?"

Sripati swallowed. "Why don't you oil your hair?"

Manasha burst into speech. "Mother keeps saying that the hussy roams in the dark, gads about in all sorts of places. Father keeps saying she is never in the house. And also others keep saying I am bad. And besides ..."

"Please, listen Manasha, listen to me."

"Forget it. Don't tell me about chastity. I live as I like, I look at the world. But the day ends so soon. And the night fills everything, like water. You know, don't you. I can't understand anything. I stay awake at night. Who can tell whose mind is going which way?"

Manasha's eyes were brimming over. For the first time. Sripati saw in her eyes tears instead of laughter. Manasha was weeping. Her tears trickled down to her lap. The musician heard rain among the palm leaves. Flooding without stay, sounding a deep sadness. He lifted his hand. "Manasha."

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Manasha looked up, abstracted.

"Manasha," Sripati called again.

Weeping still, Manasha said, "Yes?"

Sripati pressed his lips to the flute and blew: "Too hard, my friend, your heart ..."

Two nights came and went. This was the last evening. The musicians of the village had picked up quite a few scores in these two days. Although they were not all equally good, Adhar could do the tunes. The boy was sensitive. He had felt that Sripati was playing his heart out. When he played, Manasha came to sit quietly by. Then nobody could find in her the wild restive girl.

Adhar said, "Today we want a new song, *ustad*."

Sripati smiled. Srishti rapped the booming drum while talking, "This year we'll make a name for ourselves. What do you say, Subal?"

"Oh, yes, yes," Subal nodded emphatically.

"We'll put up our rates," shouted Mahadeb.

Sripati raised his hand. Instant silence. The flute lay on his lap. Joining his hands, Sripati said, "Bless me, my friends. May I not lose the music."

They all fussed in reassurance. Srishtidhar quickly covered his teacher's hands with his own. "What are you saying, master? You are our guru."

Sripati touched those rough hands to his breast before letting go.

Three lanterns stood burning in a row. A carnival of breezes blew over the margins of Dompara. Caught in the crosswind the flames would not stay still. Sripati said, "Put out the lights."

All the lights were put out. In the dark, Sripati saw from his wicker stool the black sal trees seated in silence. The wind jounced the straw thatch on the roof. Windblown dust and leaves made a stir in the yard. But these human beings did not move. The wedge of coconut overhead was slightly bigger today. Its glitter reflected off the ground. Amidst all this, they sat still, as if possessed by the waylosing spirit. Perhaps there are moments when waylosing comes into the yard, up the porch, and even enters the corners of the room. The fields and banks are at those times its kin. In the soft moonlight the musicians, high on rice beer, sat absorbed, waiting for the magic the master will make. Further away, leaning against a darkened wall, stood Manasha. Her unkempt hair floated in the untamed wind. Sripati blew on his flute: "The secret words like a treasure lie deep inside my heart ..."

Someone shouted in the darkness, "This song won't do."

People murmured among themselves. Srishti's drum petered out

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before completing the first cycle. He looked disturbed. But Manasha's voice cut the uneasy moment short, "Shut up! Great music lovers, the lot of you!"

There was some tittering at this. The trees rubbed shoulders. Ignoring it all, Sripati went on playing: "But the heart can't speak of what it knows and that is deeper smart ..."

The sad notes of the flute repeatedly tore the still night air around the players' neighbourhood. But Sripati could not make out if Manasha were breaking or melting. He only saw the darkness against the wall sway to and fro.

Before the first bird-note next morning, following the beams of the lantern held by Srishtidhar, Sripati left Penchalia.

Today, even after a gap of two years, Sripati has not forgotten the way. This is mid-Baishakh. So the wind breathes a stinging heat. It is towards evening, but the air has not cooled. Grasping his sling-bag, he sets foot on the plain.

Everything is the same. The sal wood in the distance. The palms fringing the dark waterhole. Even the Wayloser's Star.

Nothing is lost. Traversing the plain in the glow of starlight, Sripati wonders when the waylosing spell would catch him. When would he see the fitful shadow moving along? The breath of the sal wood in the divine screen of hair, and the awakening of all nature in the laughter. Nature never really sleeps, it only rests. To arouse it from rest comes another ingenuous nature. Because it alone knows nature's ways. Joy one moment and sorrow the next. A scorching squall followed by rain. Such mystery is beyond Shankar Bauri. He has no flute in his hands.

Still looking for that phantom, Sripati reaches the middle of the plain. But where is she? Fireflies flit around him. Like a garland of lights circling the dark. The sparks scatter far and wide. The palm leaves tremble with the thrill of a waterfall. Amid all this, the vast plain lies in rest. Worn out with the day's heat. And right at this moment the musician has stepped onto its heart, a mere human being. Incapable of even scratching its surface with his toenail. Where would he make a dent, its heart is of stone. After all, this is not the sand of the Sal river; with crystal water below. What can a man do, alone? But Sripati knows that he has something in his bag which can bring water from the stone at a single call. The hard ground will move. The waylosing spirit will fall under her own spell.

Sripati breathes on his flute. The song of picking flowers all night. He crosses the plain still playing the melody. Sripati plays the

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catchy tune at his own lively pace and feels the plain waking up. Indolent nature stirring itself. The whole universe seems to stretch luxuriously. Nobody called quite like this for two years. Today the call can be heard again. It has come from the heart. But is she still caught in that old doubt, wondering whose mind goes which way?

Leaving behind the plain and the path, Sripati comes to a stop before the musicians' doorway on the edge of Dompara. The conchshells have been blown through the village long before. The lamp still flickers at the shrine of Chandi. Three or four dogs bark upon seeing him. He calls loudly, "Anybody there?"

At first come the flock of boys. Like a handful of dry windblown leaves on a dust trail. A toddler holding on to his sister's hem. Behind them Srishtidhar comes first, light in hand. After him Subal, Naren. Lifting the light to his face the old man smiles, "Are you well, master?"

Sripati smiles and nods.

"But your face looks pale. Come into the light, the eyes are weak."

Bringing the light closer, Srishti carefully studies Sripati's face. Naren says from behind, "Look at the crowd come to see *ustad*."

Sripati stands with lowered head. How beautiful is the life of the sal trees. He only says, "Is everything alright?"

They answer in chorus that they are all very well. The two years had been bad. The crops failed. So there was neither work on the land nor calls for festivals. No one thinks of having a good time when the going is hard. This year there are a few contracts, may be because things are mending all over. Srishtidhar leads Sripati in by the hand.

Nothing is lost, not even the wicker stool. Sripati sits with his bag held close. The lanterns have been lit as usual. The musicians sit rubbing shoulders beyond the lanterns. Their eyes are on the master. Looking forward to the new melodies they will learn from him again this year. But where is she? Manasha cannot be seen anywhere about. Sripati thinks he will ask for news of Manasha. Instead he says, "Where has Adhar gone?"

Mahadeb says, "The master is only concerned about his disciple."

"No, of course not, just asking," Sripati smiles.

Mahadeb replies. "That good for nothing is gallivanting around."

Before Sripati can ask anything more, Srishtidhar points to Santhalpara and says, "The bastard is mad for that witch. Never picks up his instrument, always hangs around over there."

But Sripati's mind is not on all this. He had thought that someone would now volunteer information about Manasha. But no one mentions anything. Sripati looks far beyond the edge of light. There is nobody there. Only a clay pot sways from a bamboo pole supporting

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the porch. On this side, across the yard, is the kitchen. There is light inside. Vague figures move about in the glow of a wood fire. A goat cries somewhere near the kitchen. Sripati brings out his flute. Srishti says quickly, "No, no, put that by. Cool down first."

At the sound of a child crying in the far room, a married woman with her head veiled comes hastily out of the kitchen. Srishti raises his voice, "Has everyone gone to sleep?"

A young girl's voice answers, "In a moment, the water's heating."

Sripati figures that there is no point in waiting. He blows casually on the flute. No particular melody. He picks up the opening notes of a meaningless tune and plays on. He plays, but he does not close his eyes. For his mind is not on his music. The men chatter away. A few of them have lit *bidis*. Only old Srishti rubs his hands on his knees. The fast-paced notes stream out formless. As if searching everywhere for the way. Fruitlessly scouring the dark. May be a hopeless search for a selfwrought illusion. Sripati plays, but the darkness in the corner of the yard does not sway; the flute calls, but no one answers.

A little girl comes to leave a bowl of puffed rice with a blob of jaggery and fried potatoes. Sripati puts down his flute and picks up the bowl. For Srishti is insistent.

A married woman with covered head comes out of the kitchen, a glass of tea in her hand. As she bends to place the glass, Sripati's hand stops before his mouth. The lamplight cannot entirely hide her veiled face. The musician sees clearly a tiny star glittering on Manasha's nostril. She had vermilion in her parting and her hair made a neat, wavy fringe above her eyes.

Sripati is still. He tries to say something and cannot. Manasha seems to put down the glass with much grace and diffidence. But where is the screen of hair scented with the sal wood and the wide dreaming plain? And the trill of cascading laughter, the percussion of the pathless wind? Is she the same girl who could never tell whose mind went which way? Srishtidhar speaks up. "It's good wishes from all you good people, master, that Manasha is cured. There was a pledge to Baba Mahadeva as well."

The Musician slowly lowers his head. His flute lies on his lap, resting. "And yes," Mahadeb adds, "her man's back."

From the front row a dark skinny character offers Sripati a *bidi* and smirks, "I don't play instruments, *ustad*. I smoke."

The crowd hugely enjoys this clowning.

Sripati mumbles, "But this is not what I came to see."

Srishti says, "Did you say something, master?"

Sripati says in a lowered voice, "Who can tell whose mind goes

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which way?"

Dry leaves fly in the dust raised by the frenzied wind of Baisakh. The breeze in the palms by the waterhole strikes up the high tumult of the monsoons. A squall snuffs out the lantern. And the spirit of waylosing covers the universe.

In the dark, the musician sits facing the sal wood and plays: "Too hard, my friend, your heart ..."

A stinging wind chafes the stony soil. All ways are lost in the blinding dust storm. Nature is burning in the flames of a fiery Baisakh. The locks of an enraged sun seem to hurl and crash. With such a blistering noon over his head, the musician sets off on the journey back. The russet dust, like sparks of fire, flecks him in red, as red as the sky above. At such a time, the most desperate search will not reveal the Wayloser's Star. □

Translated from Bengali by Bhaswati Chakravorty and Swapan Chakravorty

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STAIN

Amiya Bhusan Mazumdar

AT night the matter between Leela and Sudhir crossed the limits of a family feud.

Susi was at the root. As she alighted from the car Leela noticed that her main wear, the saree, had become a mere apology for a cover; fortunately she wore the skirt under. The mingled giggle of Susi-Sudhir floated up the stairs, both tipsy and seemingly in close embrace;—Leela heard this also. She was keeping the night with her husband's supper before her. Her 'keeping the night' meant only ten o'clock. May be, but this was her life's first experience that she had to wait with her husband's supper in her room. Naturally, when Sudhir told that he had supped outside, Leela felt slighted.

At a stage during their quarrel Sudhir had remarked, "Don't talk, melt in shame for cheating."

Leela flared up being hurt in an old bruise, "My father never felt the need to know if I knew singing. I won't rake up that old argument. But even if I knew like the *baijees,* and had father apprehended that I have to soothe a drunken sot, he would have said—"My daughter knows singing, but I won't marry her."

"What did you say?—oh, shame, what scandal!"

"No scandal."

"It is in measuring her with your mean mind that you think her so cheap."

"What did you say?" Now it was Leela's turn.

Towards morning as he awoke it seemed to Sudhir that someone was trudging in the room. A vermillion-tinged bedlight. Leela's all choice was of deep colour. She was a girl on whom deep silk looked most befitting, and in whose features the elegantly shaped neck stood out prominently from the rough-and-tumble of her neck-ornaments.

Sudhir saw that Leela was sorting her bed, as if preparing to go somewhere.

He said, "Don't splatter the scandal."

Leela spun round, her looks like an adder. But there are beauties that look consummate only in their ferocity. In that red glow of the room Leela, scantily dressed, looked like contraband liquor in a transparent celluloid decanter.

But Sudhir realized—he should not reach for her. Then the light would go out, and Leela would open the door, and stir out in the

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wintry morn, the baby slung beside her. The night's quarrel would not be muffled like a nightmare of the previous night; rather it would shine with a bright sheen in the day's glare.

Malina, Sudhir's mother, had risen to-day earlier than usual. How else, she had her Nanad and Nandai in the house! Her hair looked a dishevelled mass overnight. She put vermillion on the streak of line within it and stood out on the verandah. She tied her bunch of keys into a knot at one end of her saree, and, walking as she leaned over, she saw the maidservants had begun their work at one corner of the courtyard.

These daily chores—putting vermillion after bed, tying the key-bunch at one end of her saree, taking stock of maidservants—they were all set in her mind by her mother-in-law like a set of formulae. Naturally as she performed these duties, like other days to-day also she remembered her mother-in-law.

The room beside the flight of stairs that lead to her mother-in-law's bedroom was Sudhir's bed-room. Malina surveyed all around her and commited a blunder. She laid her ears on Sudhir's door and fixed her eyes on her bunch of keys. Sudhir and Leela's broil last night had reached her ears. But howsoever compassionate might have been her curiosity to know if their differences were reconciled, she felt a shame within herself for eavesdropping the bed-room of her son and daughter-in-law. She resumed a brisk walk pretending retreat.

Malina often committed such odious mistakes indeliberately.

Her mother-in-law's name was Champabati. The name had become burried in oblivion in course of fifty years. It sounded too much youthish. Malina blushed to look on the face of her mother-in-law when she remembered the name. Only a very small number of household members knew her name. When the *naib* came to obtain her signature on the documents of her zamindary, he used to recall of a sudden that her name was Champabati Moullick,—a name scribbled with shivery straggling letters. It was curious to speculate how worthy of its owner this name used to be fifty years ago. But as, although others forgot it, her name often swam into notice of some as they came to obtain her signature, so her old-walletty face also revealed glimpses of its worth and weight at some rare moments. Likewise her zamindary also did not always attract notice. It had not dwindled, nor was it trite; yet it was not worthy to be considered in the balance-sheet of income and expenditure of her family at present. Her zamindary lay at one corner beside a family that ran in proportions of lakhs of a flourishing shipping-trade. Like her old *naib's* bed

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overspread with a cover beside the secretariate of the shipping concern, the axis of the family. Her existence also was like her name and zamindary: she was there, yet not enmeshed in the toils of the quotidian family affairs. She and her zamindary were like a vermillion-tinged Akbari-coin in goddess Lakshmi's *jhanpi*.

These days Malina did not have family consultations with Champabati. But it did not suffice either to depart after merely paying her compliments. Malina had to stand and talk to her for some time. Otherwise she might clean forget after half-an-hour,—if Malina had come at all, how she was looking etc. Might be that she would set on her a relay of persons to know of her health. It was no little humiliation in a houseful of people! So standing beside the door Malina asked, "Did Susi come here?"

"Yes, she has seen me."

"How did she strike you?"

"Nice girl, Bouma. Quite pert in talks, but somewhat raffish. It seems as if our very age is returning. But we dried our hairs with powder, and their hairs seem self-dried. Bouma, do you know, sometimes we, too, had to wear skirts to please your father-in-laws; but their skirts terminate much higher."

Malina could not talk in this vein with her mother-in-law. It seemed to liquidate her respect. Apart from that it was never her aim to talk about Susi. She cleverly veered the talk and went towards her householdery with the permission of her mother-in-law.

Susi was walking on the verandah on the ground-floor sipping from a steaming cup. More new than her style of walking in this house was her new-fangled cup. Malina could strongly depose, it was Susi's import—a beer—mug. Malina had read in English novels of such mugs that could be heated in the dwindling glow of the fireplace.

Susi said, "Masima, you are a veritable goddess Lakshmi."

"Why? Will you tell me?"

"But for this little milk this morning I couldn't have lifted my head; I'd such a headache. Thanks for your arrangement."

Malina asked smiling, "Whence did you get such a cup?"

Susi first looked at the pot in her hand and then at Malina. At last she broke into a smile and said, "I have no other way but to confess. My habits have put me oddly at bay."

"Well done." Malina moved towards the kitchen with her smiling face.

Malina thought: One who has to spend in Europe from an age of twelve to twentytwo can never have the Indian standards of decorum in her dress. The basic thing is to be doubtless about one's taste; it, then, induces a feeling of facility and ease, and even the

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fashion of a newly donned dress looks becoming. This is what happens in Susi's case. Even then one's heart does not admit. Susi would never have been out of place in Bombay; it jars on the senses in the Bengali society in Calcutta. Perhaps even the servants discuss about the shape of her legs, and that beer-mug! There was no need of using it. A vulgar sight.

But Malina had to tolerate much. Sudhir smoked and kept butterfly moustache—Malina had to tolerate these, and she needs must with shut eyes to these aberrations of Susi also.

Malina now entered the room of Mahindra, her Nandai, after having given the servants the components for tea. Mahindra comes once in two-to-four years for past several years—say for the last ten years. He had grown fat and bald. His services were transferred from one end of the globe to the other. Sometimes he brought Ambika (Malina's Nanad) along to see her mother. He has not left Europe during the last five years, having shuttled between Berlin, Rome and Prussia. This time, perhaps, Canberra or Tokyo.

After arranging the crockeries she said, "These people ever remained old-fashioned. Couldn't cull up table-manners. How odd, isn't it?"

Mahindra said, "A man's face is no whit so goodlooking during drinking bouts that one should copy it collectively."

Mahindra sat over his tea with a genial smile. It is his capacity to startle with such flashy remarks. Malina became pleased; she said, "But this time you shall have to stay for some time. Mother is ageing, now Didi should stay with her for some time."

"Of course."

"This reply is too old. Rather if you had replied after some deliberations, it might have been heartening."

"Why? Is not your Nanad agreeable?"

It is a joke much old. It originated from when Mahindra went outside India on diplomatic assignments. Malina knows that though the salary for such posts is drawn in favour of one man, both have to do the job.

Malina said, "But then, my Nanad and the service only are not to blame, Mr. Chowdhury."

"Who told that!" Mahindra arched his brows with a nice show of wonder.

Ambika could come to her father's house after a long gap. Instead of bathing inside the bathroom she had gone to the tank in the garden. She was returning, her face flushed red due to cold and partly due to the rigours of swimming incompatible with her age. She met Malina in the courtyard.

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"What! Where had you been to bathe, Didi, in this cold?"

Ambika said, "Quite deep, but too many leeches."

Malina bristled and said, "Even the leeches of one's home are sweet. Sample of a woman, indeed!"

Ambika replied, "I shall ask Dada since when you have become a man."

When in top gear Ambika's jokes reck not children or servants. Malina felt like escaping.

While withdrawing with a happy smile Ambika turned round and said, "Boudi, the news should be broken, but it's not being possible to tell Dada or mother "

Malina observed that she was, as it were, a different Ambika, her face pale and wan. Malina shuddered with hesitation to hear something extraordinary. Might be something regarding Susi.

Ambika said, "You arrange it. We shall leave tomorrow or the day after."

But what is there in it to become so pale! Even the pettiest creature of this house knows that Ambika will leave within two days. Does she need to be rehearsed in the respectful formalities relating to the departure of the daughter and son-in-law? Malina blushed under an indefinite shame: has Mahindra discerned some flaw this time and Ambika is trying to cover up the flaw of her father's house?

Malina said, "I thought I would detain you for some days."

Ambika wavered a little, but left as if she failed to muster up enough courage to say something.

Malina began to remember Ambika in and out of her works.

After completing her initial supervision of the family Malina had sat down to draw up a cooking menu in keeping with the shopped articles. As she raised her head at the sound of footsteps she saw that Leela was passing by her side, her son on her lap, her face clouded. In the midst of her brisk business of the day her greeting of her grandson bloomed into a lovely smile. But, her grandson! To dismiss the cooks in haste she said, "So, that's right? The rest be as yesterday." After they left Malina's eyes fell on Leela's writhing eye-brows. She promptly asked in fear, "Not ailing, Leela?" Before Leela could speak, Malina shuffled across, and taking on her lap the half-asleep child began to feel its cheek against her own to determine the temperature. She, then, became free from worries and said, "Tell me, what manner of behaviour is this? You carry on your lap the master of the family, and no smile on your face!"

Leela still remained silent. This is not usually so with her. Malina remembered last night's broil between Leela and Sudhir.

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Leela gravely said, "Mother (-in-law), I am going to my father."

The proposal was abrupt, and its language more so. If their last night's quarrel were unknown to her Malina would have crushed her brusque and impudent language under a sullen indifference. But she felt: when a son's wife quarrels with her husband and seeks permission to go to her father, it means that their efforts at reconciliation having failed, they implore, 'We can't find a way to settlement, please mediate.' But in such situations mothers-in-law have to talk with a grave mien.

Malina said, "Let me think over."

Leela told, "I phoned. Dada will come to take me in the evening."

Malina became thoughtful; Leela has carried the matter too far. She controlled her impulse to chide and said, "Do come with me."

She went into her own bedroom and there standing asked, "What happened?"

Leela had no ready answer to this question. Her bosom heaved up and down in commotion. Even as she thought that she won't speak anything she uttered, "Susi has tarred my entire face."

Malina's face turned pale. Under her feet the floor of her room rocked. Last night Sudhir supped in the hotel, may be he has had a spree in the night-club. Susi is not only his sister, his friend as well. But when a girl singes another's face, and that involves one's husband ... Malina was verging on tears under a mixed feeling of pain and anger. But those who say that Malina wasted her talents by plunging herself into family affairs know only half the truth. Malina has talents—this is the half they know, those are wasted—this notion shows their ignorance.

Malina said, "Wait for me in this room, don't go anywhere until I return."

Leela realized that she was an internee inside a fort. Sudhir has a natural right to enter this room without permission, and among others she herself had acquired it. Leela realized that now it will put an end to her own efforts to do anything, and that she shall have to look up to Malina according as time and oppurtunity suit the latter.

Malina hurried down the stairs after shutting the doors on one scandal. While simulating an expression as if nothing has happened she thought: generally Sudhir does not commit wrongs. Of course there are many an obdurate passion in a man's nature. But should not nature be a part of his total personality? Or should it be his be-all-and-end-all embracing present and future? Let it be seen. She thought at last, if she has to punish it must be secretly, smothering the sigh within her bosom.

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When such a situation is cooked up Malina needs her husband. Not for advice; for diverting herself. Otherwise the event settles firmly in her bosom and the day of occurence struggles to become unique in her memory.

Herhambaprasad was found in his study.

Malina said smiling, "No work in hand?"

"No. So unusually?"

"Only casually, to inquire about you."

Herhambaprasad was pleased to feel her presence. He told her in a style of announcing some grave political news, "Have you heard? Mother has again sent news that she shall alter the will."

Malina smiled, "Will the attorney come to-day? How many times, so far?"

"Mother's *sherishtadar* was telling, it is the fourth time. I heard that first time I got it in toto, second Ambika and the third time I and Ambika equally." Both laughed. They laughed at the idea that even they could stoop to such expectations of enjoyment and dance to the tunes of their mother's childish tantrums.

"How about you?"

Malina's face darkened for once; then she said, "Nothing." Malina again stood by her family after diverting her mind a little.

At the dinner, however, Ambika broached the topic. Tears were visible in her eyes as she said it. She is not a girl to weep over the inconveniences inherent in her husband's service; this stain on Mahindra is a far greater pain than that.

Ambika told in undertone, "Whereas history shall judge the worth of his service."

Malina said, "Those politicians that criticise his policy, can't they see the utility of the pact?"

"They say that the idea of jealousy between the two countries has room only in his imagination. His intention was to draw the nation's attention on himself for stepping up his prospects. A newspaper comments, it is a trick to strike the headlines in a paper."

"Fie, fie!"

"Do you know what more thay have said? He has earned some money in consequence, and the business tycoons of this country and the ministers of that have provided, the money." Malina began to twaddle with her food for lack of words. The sides of her ears, where one or two grey locks glistened, blushed red.

Ambika said, "Boudi, arrange for our shifting to the Bhowanipore house within to-day or tomorrow. There he shall compose his thoughts in retreat." As she returned to her bedroom she saw that

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her grandson was sleeping on the bed. Leela was sitting on the floor in stony silence. Malina brushed the hairs from her grandson's face and kissed him softly. It seemed she would say something to Leela. But she pondered something as she looked at her for sometime, and then went out.

Though she could not decide in what direction she should go, she walked on. She thought: Your identity is not simply that you are Sudhir's wife. You are also mother of a child of this house. Think of it. Take time. To divulge is to scandalise. Sin can be punished even without splattering it in the shape of scandal.

Herhambaprasad was seen at an unusual hour. He does not come inside the house at this hour. Malina was taken aback, but even then she could not visualise the ultimate of this day which dawned on her like other days.

Herhambaprasad said, "I was looking for you. A trouble has sprung up."

Trouble! The social scandal of Sudhir-Leela, the slur of Susi's unsocial act, Mahindra's historic blunder,—in their comparison a trouble is far more bearable.

Malina said, "What happened?"

"Mahin came and said that he shall stay in the Bhowanipore house at present. Can't you put them off for some days?"

"It were better for them to go", said Malina. "The staff and the relatives are yet to know of it."

"What happened?"

Malina then told about Mahindra.

Herhambaprasad said with a sour smile, "I apprehended likewise, but the house is not in my possession."

"What on earth!" Malina's wonder changed with a stab of pain, "What are you saying!"

"Yes, I had to sell it that time. You know they never stayed there, not for a day during the last ten years."

"And hence ..." Malina couldn't complete.

"A close relative of the Minister for Trade liked it. You will see how looks the underworld of bourgeois respectability. But listen, soon we are getting a house on Elgin road; negotiation is on foot."

Malina was still wordless. Now Herhambaprasad, the businessman, spoke, "That apart, that the house belonged to Ambika ..."

Malina felt like stopping her husband's mouth with her fingers. To say this is a worse scandal than selling the house. It will give rise

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to an unpleasant sequel: to establish rights to title, after which comes litigation and deposition: to raise question as to the actual owner of a house in which Ambika has stayed so many times, simply because Mahindra has no house in Calcutta! After all this her Nanad's further stay in this house shall be construed to mean that she wants to be glued to have legal possession of it; and to request them to stay more shall be taken as a gesture to pet and soothe them. What an ugly out turn of that which was a sweet meeting of intimate relatives!

But Ambika must be detained. Whatever else, the matter cannot be allowed to become shrill like a loud scandal. Let it settle down with time, let it become dull.

Malina entered her sewing room. Wool and knitters lay side by side. She took them and began to weave a design more intricate than was called for. The nimble motion of her fingers made it appear as if she had entered a competition trying to outrun somebody far behind in the race.

At the decline of noon Malina heard Sudhir and Susi were talking. Sudhir said, "I don't know that. You are a scientist, you have to find out the method."

Susi said, "Have you quarrelled?"

"Yes, you can't call it conjugal difference. I have committed something ugly. Not a thing to laugh at, Susi. Last night I was doped. In course of drinking with you that damned stuff I took an overdose of it. A man should never brag. In that respect you are my senior."

"Where is Leela?"

"I can't trace her out."

This is Sudhir's true self. One who tells even difficult things with a smiling ease. The slow rhythm of their talk began to melt Malina's rigid and stiff mind. It is not clear to her if the matter concerning Leela can be solved this way. But this much is evident that the scandal regarding Sudhir-Susi is not such that Leela will have to lose her self-respect if she reconciles. If that were so Sudhir would not have requested Susi to bring round Leela.

Malina's aching fingers stopped. She seemed to be resting herself by reclining at the back of the chair. As one scandal fades out ... could the other ones, too, do likewise ...

But even then much remains undone. The insuperable duty of asking Ambika to stay yet remains.

Malina stood with a start at the notes of the evening. She has to go to Ambika, but before that she has to perform her routine visit to her mother-in-law. Fortunately, at least the scandals have not

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spread far by now. Even if they are not hushed, yet it were good if all of them are not divulged at a time. The load of so many scandals in one day is more than it can bear.

Malina stood at the door of her mother-in-law. Mahindra's voice is heard inside, and, perhaps, that of Mitter, the attorney. They are discussing the internal implications of an old political bulletin. It is not possible that they have sat in this room for this discussion, apparently they are waiting for someone.

Malina enters after a light pull at her veil as she is wont to do to make it becoming of a good taste. Mahindra said, "Come Bouthan. Did Sarami and Shatadal go for you?"

No wonder that the maidservants did not find her; she had seldom entered her sewing room after Leela's marriage.

The attorney said in a humiliated tone for not being able to draft a satisfactory will, "I have come again. This time I have to prepare a square will for mother."

Champabati said, "Sit Bouma, here beside me. I was waiting for you. You are here not merely as a witness, you have to retouch the language also."

As Malina sat down she continued, "I have decided who shall inherit. Susi has become a doctor from Munich. The Germans, however, write "K" for Dr, and Susi has become a Doctor without reading M.Sc. Be that as it may, she won't marry, she will espouse Science. She shall get all my cash money and the sumtotal of the proceeds of my zamindary during her life-time. After that the revenue from my zamindary shall revert to Sudhir's son. And I have arranged further that after me Ambika and Herhamba shall divide between them my houses."

Neither of Mahindra or Malina spoke. Malina's heart had congealed to hear about the houses;—she, too, bent down her head.

Champabati said, "I bequeathed all to Herhamba, likewise in case of Ambika also. But none of the times could I dispel a confusion within me. The will, too, had to be changed. Listen, why it was so. Then you and Mahin sign on the witnesses. I can't make out which one of the two has the better claim. Ultimately I bequeathed it to Science."

She gulped some water as if preparing for a speech. The loose hanging muscles beneath her jowl began to vibrate with the veins of her throat.

"You know that Ambika and Herhamba are twins. Their complexion and facial features differ, but the identities are none the less. But you cannot define them only by these details. Varsilief says

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(Champabati smirked), twins with even less similarities are found. More than these, I have laid both to sleep and watched their differences and resemblances. Even then I could not solve it, how can you? They are elder or younger only by three days. I myself can't say who the elder or younger. Herhamba has assumed the title of an elder by virtue of his brawn. In their childhood each fought to lord over the other."

Champabati smiled after her last word.

"I became unconscious after one of those two was born, I can't say, which. I regained sense after about three days, and a week after that the doctor allowed me to handle my first issue. They brought Ambika to my lap. It never struck me then. After a week or so one day I suddenly remembered: just before my swoon someone had said, I had a son born to me. I can't explain, though, why mothers generally hanker after a son as their firstborn. Mahindra, don't mind, boy. I had seen your mother and she had confessed that she had an attraction for a son. But all said, God knows, Ambika is no less dear to me than Herhamba.

"We were then in sore trouble. Your father-in-law was, then, in the neighbouring district to conduct a sessions court. Even the news of my plight did not reach him in time. Receiving the news my young Devar had conducted here his wife for my nursing. But he left soon after reaching his wife to attend a political conference. Look, this is the reason that I could never look well upon politics and government service. My Devar was the most thoughtless among the professors of science. When he brought my younger sister-in-law for nursing, she, too, was carrying full. After she saw my condition, out of panic or otherwise, her child also was born within two days of mine. She tended my child side by side with her own and sustained them for some days. Then they brought to me Ambika."

"Ma!" Malina anxiously tried to prevent her from disclosing the harsh truth that was kept secret so long.

Champabati said, "Not such an easy matter, Bouma. I heard and saw all after I recovered my senses. It appeared to me as if the entire house had become my sister-in-law's subject within this period. Only my waitress, a simpleton, shuffled between the rooms with the pot of fire. Just then I remembered—someone had said that I had a son. Whether anyone really said so or not, I doubt even to-day, but ... I took five to seven days to compose my thoughts. Then one day I exchanged from my sister-in-law's room: a daughter for a son. She was then sleeping. She thought, perhaps this was sheer fun. Herhamba remained with me four or five days. One day she said

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angrily, "What's this, Didi? Give me my son. Or else give me both son and daughter ...' No, I don't feel like saying more."

After a pause Champabati resumed, "My sister-in-law was more educated than I; her parentage was relatively wealthier than mine. Even then she had queer complex—she was labouring under a conceit that compared to me she does not get her due respect in the house. She was getting obstinate and perverse. One morning as I rose from bed I heard the waitress clamouring. My sister-in-law is untraced. Ambika's throat perched dry crying. My sister-in-law could never be found after this. Then we lived in our house in Gopalpur. The sea, too, seemed closer to the house. All arrived at the news, and we also left Gopalpur. I could not make out which of the son and daughter is mine; and there was neither need of it after she had left. I felt no urge either to look for proof."

After a little silence Champabati said, "Yes, now sign. To-day one can't account for what we did then and why. Almost all doctors to-day know that often during delivery there are temporary mental setbacks."

Malina came out of the room after signing the will. The stairs looked dunnish as if she was out into garish light after biding long hours inside a cinema-hall. Like a naked-bright sword from within a tarnished velvetty scabbard Champabati of twentytwo divested herself of her withered cover, loose and walletty, and stood before her with a primitive lust for son. To say that that greed of her became the cause of one's death is merely to circumscribe it. But what need had she to divulge so long after? To obtain consent for changing the will? Only that?

Susi's doors were only a few steps, and Malina's mind was eager to flee Champabati's narration. As she slowed intending to talk to Susi, Malina saw: beyond the ajar doors there was Susi in kimono, a mug of freshly poured beer, its froth spilling over to the table. She had a burning cigarette in one hand and her other hand pressed her forehead.

Malina thought, almost in tears, she could have better closed the door. It marked its first admission into the house.

But the scandal of fifty years seemed to overlap all others. □

Translated from Bengali by **Asim Kumar Mukherjee**

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With a genuine sense of joy and pride we publish below a long shortstory by U.R. Anantha Murthy, Jnanpith award winner, 1994, freshly translated from Kannada; ten poems by Ashok Vajpeyi, winner of the Dayawati Modi award, translated from the original Hindi and five poems by Ramkanta Rath, winner of the Kabir Samman, 1994, translated from the original Oriya.

—EDITOR

GHAṬAŚRĀDDHA*

U.R. Anantha Murthy

IT was still dark as I got up and stood rubbing my eyes. Sheshagiri Udupa was standing there in the yard with a bundle in his hand, ready to leave. He saw me and said: "I'll look up your parents; while I am in Kudumallige." At the mention of my parents, the thought that if I were at home now I'd be sleeping at this time, draped warm in my mother's sari, crossed my mind. I felt homesick at the thought that mother would wake me up, wash my face and give me coffee.

Just as he was about to cross over the fence, Sheshagiri Udupa stopped and called out to his daughter, "Yamuna!" Yamunakka came and stood by the door, covering her head with the end of her red sari. Sheshagiri Udupa said as he crossed over the stile, "Then, I'll go, what do you say? Keep an eye on the boys. Don't let them swim too long in the stream. It may be more than three months by the time I finish the *yaga* at Gokarna and then go to Udyavara. See that the children do their daily recitation. I've told the rest to Upadhyaya."

Sheshagiri Udupa was older than my father. I was scared of him. But then, I always took liberties with Yamunakka. She was much younger than mother. The moment Udupa turned his back, I started pestering her; I wanted to go home. "Listen, keep quiet. Wash your face and go and pluck some *tulasi* leaves," said Yamunakka as she went in. Just then Vishwanath Shastri and Ganesha got

* Funeral rite for the living

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up and came. They laughed at me as I stood crying, watching the figure of Sheshagiri Udupa disappear in the darkness. I went with them to the well to wash my face. "What man, girlie?" enquired Shastri. Ganesha let the pitcher down the well and said as it was filling up, "Say, Shastri. I believe this fool sat up crying the night before his *upanayana* because someone told him that they'd cut open his thighs and stuff it with toads." I went back to the kitchen crying. "Come, we'll draw water for you," they called out.

Yamunakka was churning buttermilk. She looked sad. After I had called her a couple of times, she looked at me and said trying to console me, "Let them be. Don't go with them. I'll wash your face."

After I had my face washed, I picked up a basket and headed eastward, alone. I plucked the *tumbe* flowers along the way. As I was small and very short, Shastri always teased me—"We'll have a ladder fixed to the *tumbe* plant, okay?" Shastri was much older than me—actually, he looked like a grownup boy. He was an orphan. And was studying the Vedas with Udupa; just like me. His one eye was very small and the other large. Ganesha teased him as one-eyed Shuklachari. They formed a pair. I was always alone. I walked along to Gopala Joisa's house. As there was a *bilwa* tree in his yard, I asked Gopala Joisa's sister Godavaramma for a pole. Godavaramma too, just like Yamunakka, was a widow. But Yamunakka is much younger than her. Yamunakka is pink and round, and looks much nicer than even mother. I believe, Yamunakka's husband died of snake bite, just a few days after marriage. And after Sheshagiri Udupa's wife died, she had come back to stay with her father—to take care of him. Ganesha had told me all this. He was distantly related to Udupa.

Seeing me jump with a pole in hand, trying to pluck the *bilwa* leaves, Godavaramma took the pole saying "Come, I'll pluck them for you." And later when I was plucking the *tulasi* leaves in the yard, she asked: "Has Udupa left for Gokarna?" I said "Yes."

"How's Yamuna?"

"She's fine."

"She's not been coming to the temple for sometime now—I heard she's not well."

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? Isn't she lying down all the time? Didn't Udupa say anything?"

"The other day she said she was feeling dizzy and lay down. Udupa gave her some medicine. That's all."

"Is that all!" she laughed.

And as she went in Godavaramma called out to Gopala Joisa:

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"Did you hear that! I believe Yamuna has no fever. Just a lump, without any fever. Poor thing!" And she laughed.

On my way back, I picked up some dry twigs for *agni karya* from the *asvata* tree at the end of the lane. When I returned I found Yamunakka waiting for me. "How long do you take? Look, Upadhyaya has been waiting for you." And she hurriedly drew a couple of pitchers of cold water from the well, poured them on me and said, "Quick. Go sit for *japa*." I squeezed the water from the waistcloth, dried my long hair with it, tied it into a knot and ran inside with the same wet cloth around me. I took a clean cloth from Yamunakka, wrapped it around my waist, covered my shoulders with another and set off with a *pancapatre* in my hand. "Aye, have you worn your loin cloth?" Yamunakka called out. I had forgotten. Yamunakka laughed, tucked a loin cloth round my silver waist band and said: "Now, go."

The Upadhyaya with the pock marked face scolded me, "Why so late?" Udupa never scolded me. "You still haven't learnt your *japa mantra*!" and then he made me go through the *japa*. Shastri who was sitting nearby doing his *japa* was delighted to see me being scolded. He looked at Ganesha with his one-eye and smiled. After the *japa* was over, I did the *agni karya*. Once it is over, Upadhyaya leaves for the temple *puja*. On his way he said, "After you've had your meal come over and grind some sandal paste."

Inside, the leaves had been laid out in a row. We ran in and sat down. Yamunakka served us rice gruel and coconut oil. She also gave us some tender mango pickles. On days when coconuts were plenty, we'd have rice cooked in coconut milk.

We noisily ate our meal and got up. Shastri and Ganesha went out. I stayed back in the kitchen.

"Today you'll have lunch at the Sahukar's house. He had come yesterday to call you over", said Yamunakka. I was thrilled—it meant a *payasa-meal,* after the *puja* at the temple. I'll also get a *dakshina*. Before my thread ceremony I'd only get a paisa. But now, I get a full anna. I'm glad that I've had my *upanayana*. But then, it also means that I can't climb trees. Can't play with dogs. Can't wear shorts. Can't talk while eating—I miss all these. Yet, the tinkle of the anna as it falls into the *pancapatre* kept besides the leaf, makes me happy. Yamunakka kept a money box with a slot in it. I put all my *dakshina* in it. "Give it to your mother, when you go home," Yamunakka had said. "Miser!" Shastri always taunted me.

"Why did you come so late, Nani. You got a scolding from Upadhyaya, for nothing," said Yamunakka. I said that I had been to

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Godavaramma's house for *bilwa* leaves, and told her what she had asked me. Yamunakka was aghast. "What else did she ask? Tell me! Tell me!" she persisted. "Some fever, some lump, they talked amongst themselves and laughed." Yamunakka covered her face with the end of her sari and wept.

"If anyone else asks, tell them I have fever, okay?" she said.

Since I found Yamunakka lying down whenever she was free, and since she had also stopped going to the temple I thought it must be true that she was not keeping well. It was noon by now and I sat down for my *japa*. After the *puja* in the temple, all of us, except for Yamunakka, had a grand meal at the Sahukar's house. When the meal was over Upadhyaya called us over and said, "I can't come over today. You study by yourselves. Aye Shastri, see that this boy studies properly," and put me under Shastri's charge. Every afternoon, after meal, Udupa made us memorize *Shri sukta, Purusha sukta* and such other *mantras*, while he sat at the spinning wheel making sacred thread. Yamunakka would sit at a corner tying the flowers into a garland, for the temple. When Udupa was at home, this routine was never missed. I was thrilled that today I was free.

Shastri called me over and said: "Now let us see you recite the *Purusha sukta*." He has had more lessons than me. Yamunakka always scolded him, saying he had grown up like a young buffalo. I stood in front of him, tongue-tied. "Let it be. At least recite your *pravara* and *gotra* properly." Ganesha was laughing. I began: "I, *angirasa, ambarisha yaunashva trayarshreya pravaranvita, angirasa, gotra, ashvalayana sutra rikshakadyayi narayana sharman* ..." Shastri interrupted: "Here, say it properly. Standing up and touching your ears." I once again started from the beginning and ended: "*Aham bho abhivadaye*." "Now prostrate before me." I prostrated. "Listen, if you do as I say, no more lessons for you." I was overjoyed. The moment he said go, I ran to Yamunakka.

Yamunakka had served herself some food on the plantain leaf and sat in front of it holding her head in her hands. She had poured some mango curry on the rice. But it didn't look like she'd even had a handful. When I sat in front of her, she pretended to eat a few mouthfuls and then went and threw the rest into the garbage. "Why Yamunakka?" I asked. I knew she was fond of mango curry. "Don't know why? Just don't feel like it," she said and sighed. I placed the coin that was my *dakshina* on her palm. She said as she put it into my money box : "Go tell Shastri to go to Shivapura and get a seer of dry chillies and some coriander from the shop." I went to the Sahukar's house in search of Shastri. The servant boy said he was upstairs. I went upstairs. A carpet was spread out. Sahukar's son Ranganna, a

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couple of boys from the *agrahara* and Shastri were sitting in a circle. They had some paper cards in their hands which they were holding close to their chest. Ganesha sat watching them. I stood watching. They kept throwing the cards in the middle saying words like Ace, King, Queen, Jack and looking at each other's faces. I asked Ganesha what it was. "Cards!" he whispered. I told Shastri what Yamunakka had asked me to tell him. "A beast in the middle of a Shiva *puja*," he grunted angrily and passed what he had in his hands on to Ganesha and got up. "If you tell anyone, I'll knock your teeth out! Do you understand?" he threatened as he came out with me.

He told me to go with him to Shivapura. I said I'll have to ask Yamunakka. "Don't be a girlie, all your life," he growled. Since I wanted to go to Shivapura, I went along. At the end of the *agrahara* is a tank. Once you cross that, there is the big forest with a little temple and a path. We took the path. After we had walked some distance, he left the path, turned into the bushes and asked me to follow him. There was a huge tree there. It had a hollow at about a man's height. I stood watching anxiously, as Shastri put his hand into it. He took something from inside, held it in his closed fist and asked, "Guess what's in it?" When I said I don't know, he opened it. There was a pack of *bidis*. He put his hand inside once again and this time pulled out a match box. "Sit," he said. I sat down. "Do you know what pleasure there is in letting out smoke through one's nose," he said as he let out a whiff of smoke. "You too smoke one," he insisted. I said no. I sat watching him, with my mouth wide open, frightened.

"Don't ever tell this to Yamunakka, okay? Shouldn't carry tales," he said. I said alright.

"Even if you tell, I am not afraid, do you understand? Don't I know about Yamunakka. Let her try scolding me one more time—I'll spill out everything. They say, the cat drinks milk with its eyes closed."

I didn't understand what Shastri was talking about. But I was afraid. I thought I shouldn't have come without telling Yamunakka. As we were climbing down the Shivapura hill, having bought the things from Gopal Kamath's shop, Shastri said, "On our way back let's take a different path. On the bank of the stream."

I was too scared to say no. One look at one-eyed Shastri, and the thought of how he would bully me as he stood squeezing his pimples, was enough to frighten me. On the way he said, "I'll show you something interesting. You'll understand everything, once you see it. Why should I become a bad guy by speaking the truth?"

After we had walked for a long while we came across an old *agrahara* in ruins. It was on the bank of the stream. It was known as

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Hodala. I had come here once, long ago with Yamunakka to collect firewood. The houses had all fallen and only some walls and their foundations still remained. An ancient Jain *basadi* and a temple without a deity were now occupied by bats. Yamunakka had said "Once upon a time people lived here. Now it is all in ruins." I was afraid that there may be ghosts there. "*Ayyo*, you coward," laughed Shastri as he took me behind the walls of a ruin, carefully stepping over the bushes. He bid me to watch through the crack in a wall and himself went over behind a window and waited.

Sometime later I saw a man approach at a distance. I got scared and said to Shastri, "Let's go!" Shastri shot back angrily: "Do you want to grow up or not? Or do you want to remain a wimp all your life? You are Shukamuni's reincarnation!" I sat watching, frightened. I was a bit relieved when I realized that the man wearing a dhoti, shirt and well-combed hair was someone I saw everyday. He was the Master at the school next to Udupa's house. He is from Tumkur, stays at Shivapura and comes everyday on his bicycle. During Ramanavami he had played the harmonium at the temple. He was lean, tall and looked a townsman.

I said "Let's go." Shastri replied "Wait for sometime." Peeping through the crack in the wall, I noticed a snake. "A snake!" I said, frightened. "Keep quiet!" growled Shastri. After a while another man, with a big moustache, arrived there. I didn't know who he was. The two of them stood talking.

Having seen the snake I began to get nervous and wanted to leave. Shastri too must have gotten bored. "You are a wimp. Come, let's go," said Shastri as he led me stealthily back to the dirt track. From there we headed home. It was evening by the time we reached. Yamunakka was sitting looking very sad. I only told her about having gone to the shop. I was too scared to tell her about having visited the ruined *agrahara* or about the snake that I had seen there. We bathed and sat down for *sandhyavandana*. And then we ate. Yamunakka had some parched rice, mixed with curds.

At night, Shastri, Ganesha and I spread our mattresses in the *chavadi*. Yamunakka was sleeping in the middle-room. I was scared, having seen the snake in the evening. That night, even Udupa was not there sleeping with us in the *chavadi*, like he did every night. When I said I wanted to go and sleep in middle-room, Shastri taunted me as a girlie and a coward. So I continued to lie there. I couldn't get to sleep. I thought of my parents. And thinking that I was in some strange house with some strange people, I began to cry. Shastri who was sleeping by my side, gently put his hand over me and slid

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near. I was disgusted by the smell of *bidi* that came from his mouth. He untied the knot of my dhoti and slipped his hand down to my groin. I got up and went to the middle-room and lay down by Yamunakka's side. Yamunakka was awake. "I am scared," I said. "Come sleep here," she said and draped her sari over me.

As I was beginning to fall asleep, I thought I heard some footsteps around the house. I woke up in a fright. I started to tremble at the thought that it must be a ghost. Yamunakka put her arms around me. There was the sound of somebody coming near the door. Then a knock. I clung to Yamunakka. A voice called out softly "Open the door." It could only be a *brahma rakshasa*—in this darkness, coming in the inauspicious direction and knocking on the door. I was convinced of it, and broke into a cold sweat. Yamunakka got up. I clung to her hand begging her not to go. She got up and went. I followed her. "Don't come. Might be a ghost. I'll place a broom at the door, so it can't enter," said she and went, leaving me alone in the middle-room. I stood crying, waiting for her to return. Yamunakka who went to the rear door did not open it. If she had, I would have heard a creaking noise. I only heard her say "Go away, don't come here." When Yamunakka returned, I was even more frightened—she had just spoken with a *brahma rakshasa*. She pulled me along and forcibly made me lie down. I fell asleep after a long while.

I got up before sunrise, but was scared to go to the well alone, so I asked Yamunakka to come with me. I was afraid that if Shastri got to know of it, he would make life miserable, teasing and taunting me. Later, when I picked the basket and set out to collect *tulasi* and flowers, Shastri said "I am coming with you." I didn't have the courage to say no. What with a *brahma rakshasa* roaming around the house and also having seen a snake, I was afraid to go alone.

On the way, Shastri inquired :

"What did the *brahma rakshasa* tell Yamunakka, last night?"

I said I didn't know.

"Yamunakka got up and went. Didn't she say anything?"

"She said—Go away, don't come. Then she placed a broom near the door and came back."

"Do you know who that *brahma rakshasa* is? You are still a child. They say the cat drinks milk with its eyes closed. Someday you'll understand. Yamunakka doesn't like me, right? But she secretly gives you *unde* and *kodubale*. Doesn't she?"

I didn't know what to say and kept quiet. When we went to Godavaramma's house for *bilwa* leaves, she asked :

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"How's Yamuna?"

"It's true that Yamunakka has fever," I said.

"No fever. No nothing. Last night a *brahma rakshasa* was going around the house and then came and knocked on the rear door," said Shastri with his one-eye glinting. Godavaramma, with great relish, sought out all the details.

After we had plucked the *bilwa* leaves, Shastri said to me : "Aye Bhrgu, let's go to Subhramanya temple and pluck some *sampige* flowers." We crossed a field and went there and gathered the flowers.

Shastri asked: "Will you touch the deity—Lord Subhramanya—when you are in pollution? Do you have the guts?"

"They say, if you pollute Lord Subhramanya you'll be haunted by snakes. I don't want to get into trouble," I said.

"That's why we call you things a wimp, a girlie, a fink, Bhrgu. What a coward you are? If someone tells you a *brahma rakshasa* is running around the house, you believe it. No? Now watch me. I'll touch it," said he and walked right into the sanctum and touched the deity. I was overcome by fear and revulsion. He said "You touch too" and dragged me along and made me touch the deity.

"Ah, ha, I have the Garuda spot on my palm. That's why I touched it so boldly. Now a snake will certainly bite you!" he laughed out and began to dance around me. I began to weep.

"Listen, if you do as I say, nothing will happen. I'll see that the snake won't come near you. Only thing is you shouldn't tell Yamunakka what I tell you. If you do, I'll tell everyone that you touched the deity when in pollution." I came back home, wiping my tears. When Yamunakka asked what had happened, I kept my mouth shut out of fear. Yamunakka called Shastri and scolded him: "What you eat, does it go straight to your head?"

I avoided Shastri all day. I was afraid that a snake might pop out of any corner. I went around with the *Gayatri mantra* on my lips all the time. At night I slept by Yamunakka's side. The *brahma rakshasa* didn't come that night.

From that day onwards I kept away from Shastri. Whenever he caught me alone, he'd give me a dirty look and threaten me: "If you say anything to Yamunakka, you'll die of snake bite." I never spoke. I started to follow Yamunakka wherever she went. Shastri, Ganesha and the Sahukar's son Ranganna were always huddled together, whispering to each other.

One day Yamunakka said: "Come, let's get some firewood," and took me along the path that led to the ruined *agrahara*. Halfway through I got scared. I sat down and started to cry. "There is a snake

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there," I insisted. She threatened me; pleaded with me. I didn't relent. She came back home with me, grumbling.

Another day, in the morning, I went to Godavaramma's house to get *bilwa* leaves. Godavaramma saw me and saying come, put her hand on my shoulder and led me in. She took me to the kitchen and offered me coffee. I said no. "Nothing will happen, if you have it once in a while." I was tempted by the sight of coffee. I wanted it. And as I sat drinking it, Godavaramma said :

"Not bad. You are a very disciplined boy. Not like those others. Where do they listen to you these days? There's a saying—*japa* has slipped away and the *agni karya* has climbed up the attic. Now look at that Sahukar's son Ranganna. He is a street bull. Has grown up like buffalo and is sprouting a beard."

And as I got up to go, she asked :

"Why isn't Yamuna coming to the temple these days? Doesn't she get up at all?"

I said no.

"Who cooks for you poor things? Udupa is not at home. That *brahma rakshasa,* does it come around the house still."

"Not since that day."

"What, does Yamuna vomit and things like that? They say if there is a lump, one vomits a lot. I had asked her to take some medicines the other day. Does she take anything?" she continued. I didn't know what to say. I got up and left.

When I got home, I told Yamunakka everything. Yamunakka sank down, aghast. Her eyes were brimming with tears. She asked me not to go there anymore. I agreed.

That afternoon, Ganesha's father, Thippa Shastri came from Horani. When Yamunakka tried to talk to him, he didn't talk. He didn't touch the sweet drink that she offered him. He told Ganesha to pack up his clothes and things and took him along. Yamunakka cried for a long time.

That night, when I went to the backyard to wash my hands after my meal, I heard footsteps along the path leading to the house. "Yamunakka!" I shrieked. Yamunakka and Shastri came out running. We saw someone running away in the dark. "What is to be done about this *brahma rakshasa*?" said Shastri with a sneer, looking at Yamunakka. "You shut up!" snapped Yamunakka.

I cried all night, wondering why my father too, like Ganesha's couldn't come and take me home with him. Yamunakka clung to me and wept, saying: "Don't ever leave me."

Yamunakka stayed in the house all the time. When

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Godavaramma came one day and knocked the door—it was evening—she made me tell her that she was not there. At noon when Upadhyaya got up to go, after finishing our lessons, Yamunakka brought him some sweet drink. He said "I don't want it," and left. She always stood in some corner or other, lost in thought and crying.

One afternoon Upadhyaya finished our lessons and left. Shastri went away to meet Ranganna. Yamunakka and I were the only ones at home. Puttarangi, the Konkani woman, came by the rear door and sat down to talk with Yamunakka. And while talking she said, "What, Yamunamma! These days you look very nice. You've put on weight and look very healthy." The moment these words were out of her mouth, Yamunakka got up and went in and never came out. Puttarangi waited for a long time, then went away saying, "Did Amma get angry at something?"

That night Yamunakka made me lie down by her side, and kept crying for a long time. Later, she untied the knot of her sari at the waist, slid it down, placed my ear on her lower belly and asked, "Nani, do you hear anything?" I felt immense pleasure at the touch of her warm, soft belly against my cheek. I was reminded of my mother. And when Yamunakka started to cry, I too cried with her. She pressed my face against her breasts and caressing my back said, "Nani, you don't ever leave me and go, okay." I slept happily that night.

The day after, Upadhyaya didn't come—neither to make us recite the *japas* nor for the Veda lessons. He finished the *puja* in the temple and went away from there. And thereafter he never came to the house. I was pleased, as I didn't have to bathe three times nor do the *sandhyavandana*.

One day Shastri, who set out to get the *tulasi* and *bilwa* leaves, never returned. He stayed in the Sahukar's house. If ever saw me he'd mock at me from a distance.

Yamunakka never let me go out of the house those days. I'd get very angry. I sat at the window all day, looking out. One-eyed Shastri chatted and played with Ranga. The Primary School children kicked up ruckus playing tree monkey or with tops. Not a worm strayed near our house. Yamunakka and I spend a week like this. I'd cry wondering why my father didn't come and take me home. I'd get angry at the sight of Yamunakka. And when she saw me get angry tears would well up in her eyes and she'd cry, "Don't leave me." One day when Yamunakka tried to caress me, I kicked her. But then I said I was sorry. That night, when everyone in the *agrahara* was asleep, she woke me up and took me along to the temple. There she lit a lamp in front of the deity, sat with her eyes closed for a long

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time, prostrated before it and returned home.

One afternoon I was sitting alone by the window. I was very angry with Yamunakka. Why didn't father come and take me? On the street, the girls were playing hopscotch. Shastri came on to the street with Ranganna and saw me. He came near the window and waved to me to come out. I shook my head saying no. "Come, let's run around." I was tempted to go out. "I'll ask Yamunakka," I said. "Yamunakka is not at home," he said. I went in, looked around, and was surprised to find that Yamunakka was not there. I went out with him.

Three other boys of the *agrahara*—the ones who were playing cards that day—came along with Shastri and Ranganna. As we were walking along the bank of the tank, I realized that they were taking me to the ruined *agrahara* and was frightened. "I am not coming," I insisted. "Let him go. He is a wimp," Ranganna said to Shastri. But Shastri wouldn't listen. He dragged me along. "We've written to your father. To come and take you away. But before that I want you to see some fun," said Shastri very sweetly, holding my hand. I was afraid that they'd start teasing me as a "girlie" again, and so I went along. All along the way, I was haunted by the thoughts of my having touched Lord Subhramanya while in pollution, seeing the snake and the *brahma rakshasa* running around the house. Added to that was the fear that these five would start to mock me at any moment.

We walked for a long time by the pathway in the forest and came near the *basadi* that was in one corner of the ruined *agrahara*. We could hear the stream from there. Shastri whispered, "From here, follow me quietly." He led the way and we followed stealthily and came to the broken wall that Shastri and I had hidden behind the other day. Shastri and I sat at the crack in the wall and peeped. The other four were taller and stood peeping from above the wall. I remembered the snake and my heart began to pound.

Shastri said, "See what's there." At a little distance from us, Yamunakka was sitting on a flat cobblestone with her back to us. She sat stooped with her head resting on both her hands. I was baffled—what is she doing here? alone? isn't she afraid? doesn't she know there are snakes here? After sometime, seeing Yamunakka get up, the ones who were watching from above the wall ducked down. Yamunakka walked in our direction, as if she were looking for someone. I wanted to call out "Yamunakka, we are all here. Peeping. There's a snake here." But before I could open my mouth, Shastri's hand closed on it. Ranganna glared at me with his finger at his nose.

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I kept quiet.

Yamunakka started in our direction then stopped and stared at the broken wall. Shastri held his breath and his hand tightened over my mouth. Yamunakka wiped her eyes with the end of her sari, groped around like a blind woman and then went and sat on the stone—like before.

I was getting bored sitting. Sahukar's son Ranganna and the others got tired of standing and sat down. They whispered in Shastri's ears, to let them know the moment he saw. Ranganna lit a cigarette. He gave one to Shastri. Shastri said to me, "In a short while the *brahma rakshasa* will come here. You can see him for yourself." I was frightened. After a long time, it was evening.

I thought of my parents. I've gotten myself trapped in someone else's plot. I was worried whether I'd ever go home or not. I told Shastri, "Let's go back." "If you want to go back, go. But, on the way the snake will come chasing you. I have the Garuda spot in my hand. You know it, don't you?" he scolded me and then laughed. I kept quiet.

After a while we saw someone approach from a distance. He was lean and tall; was wearing a dhoti and shirt and had cropped hair. When he came closer, I realized that he was the same man we had seen the last time we were here. He had come from Tumkur and came daily to our school on his bicycle. I didn't know the name of this wheatish complexioned townsman.

Shastri snapped his fingers and announced, "The *brahma rakshasa* has arrived." All those who were sitting, stood up and peeped over the wall.

I was surprised when he sat by Yamunakka's side, with his back to us. "Look, look. Look properly—Aye Shukamuni," said Shastri poking me. He said something to Yamunakka. Her whole body shook. He held her hand. She pulled it free and slid away from him. Shastri whistled, lit a cigarette and looked at me with his eyebrows raised.

As I sat peeping through the crack, I noticed a snake slowly creeping. "Snake," I said. Everyone looked at it. "Must be a rat snake. keep quiet," they said. I was about to shout. Ranganna slapped me on the face and shut me up. When I started to cry, Shastri said, "Don't cry. There's more fun coming. Just watch." I kept quiet.

I sat, rubbing my cheek. The snake was silently crawling to where Yamunakka was sitting. She never looked back. The snake crawled along, glistening, smelling here and there. "Rat snake. Don't worry," said Shastri. And then, "Don't look at the snake. It'll wind its way to its hole. Just watch their fun." The snake turned left, away from Yamunakka. Then it turned right and again started to slither in her

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direction. One of the boys said, "This widow has polluted the deity. That's why this snake." The rest nodded their heads in agreement. I trembled at the thought of I having touched Lord Subhramanya while in pollution. I looked around me. Ranganna said, "If it's god who has sent this snake, then surely it'll bite her. As punishment for her sin."

The snake coiled around and stopped. Opened its hood and looked around. I was scared that it might see me. "Cobra! Cobra!" everyone muttered. I got up. Shastri pulled me down. The snake began to crawl again, towards the cobblestone.

He continued to say something to Yamunakka. But Yamunakka sat with her hands covering her face. He moved closer and put his hand on her shoulder. Yamunakka pulled herself away and stood up.

Those that were watching over the wall sat down. I was glad that Yamunakka might now see the snake. But then, she didn't see it at all. She once again sat by his side. I felt like crying. The snake crept along near the cobblestone on which she was sitting. I closed my eyes and prayed, "Subhramanya! Subhramanya!" The snake was feeling the edge of the cobblestone with its head. I shook all over. Shastri grasped my hand and said—"The right punishment for the wrong she's done."

The snake found a gap along the stone and went inside it. My hair stood on end at the thought that the snake might bite her in the leg. Looks like the snake didn't find enough place in the gap between the stones; it came out. It glistened in the evening sun that emerged from behind the clouds.

He was still saying something to Yamunakka and once again put his hands on her shoulder. I thought—Yamunakka will now pull away from him and stand up and then she'll see the snake—and heaved a sigh. But Yamunakka didn't get up like I thought she would. She pressed against him and cried, then embraced him. She rested her head on his lap.

I pulled away my hand and leapt. Before Ranganna and Shastri could catch me, I went round the broken wall and ran towards her shouting, "*Ayyo,* Yamunakka! There's a snake there!"

Yamunakka leapt to her feet. In a panic she ran ten steps and stood stunned. Those behind the broken wall jumped down and ran. The man with Yamunakka, the moment he saw them, pulled up his dhoti and ran away in another direction. I picked up a stone as I was running and ran towards the cobblestone. With all the strength in me I threw it at the snake, broke into a sweat, ran towards Yamunakka and embraced her. The stone must have hit the snake. It opened its

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hood wide, hissed, and stung at the cobblestone. I was scared to death as I stood there, my head pressed against Yamunakka's belly and my arms grasping her tightly. I picked up another stone and threw it in the direction of the snake. It slid down from the cobblestone. Swaying its long thin body, hissing, it headed towards us. We ran. I ran ahead, dragging Yamunakka along by her hand. I stopped only when Yamunakka said she could run no more, and sank down and sat. I was sweating all over and felt dizzy. I sat down by Yamunakka and opened my eyes only when I had recovered my breath. The snake put its head into a hole in the ant-hill in front of us. Slowly, it drew its long body inside and finally only the sharp tip of its tail could be seen. Then even that disappeared. I sat watching it without batting an eye. In the desolate ruins of that *agrahara* only three of us remained—Yamunakka, I, and the snake that slithered into the blackness of its hole, wounded but not killed, hissing in seething anger.

I lifted Yamunakka to her feet and took her home, getting in through the rear door. My legs were trembling. But since I was feeling quite heroic, I didn't cry when I reached home. I latched and bolted all the doors and came to the middle-room. There, Yamunakka was rolling on the floor. She kept moaning and crying like someone about to die. I stood silently. As I had closed all the doors, the middle-room was quite dark. I couldn't see Yamunakka. I could only hear the sound of her rolling around and crying. For a long time I stood in the corner.

Yamunakka stopped rolling around and called out to me to come to her. In the darkness, I groped my way to where she lay. She put both her arms around and embraced me. It was then that I realized that she was stark naked. She took my face in her hands and placed it on her belly crying, "*Ayyo,* the burning, the burning!" My face, that was pressed against her soft warm belly, was drenched in sweat. I couldn't breathe. "*Ayyo*, let me go! let me go!" I cried, broke free and stood up. Yamunakka became silent. She lay stretched out, motionless.

I sat quietly for sometime. I wished I too were at home, like Ganesha. If Yamunakka were to die, then I could go home. Then the fear that she might already have died gripped me. "Yamunakka, Yamunakka," I called out. There was no reply. I got scared. "Yamunakka, I'm hungry," I cried. I heard Yamunakka get up and put on her sari. She went to the kitchen, mixed some parched rice in curd and gave it to me. "What about you?" I asked. "You eat," she said and sat in the dark. Eating the rice in the dark, I started to cry. "Don't cry," said Yamunakka, tenderly.

Outside, the door was being banged. Some four or five voices

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were shouting, "Open the door! Open the door!" Yamunakka didn't get up. She didn't utter a word. Then Ranganna called asking her to send me out. Yamunakka said to me, "If you want, you go." "I won't go," I said. I sat holding Yamunakka's hand. Once again the banging on the door started, this time as if to break it down. Then there was silence. After sometime, a voice called out : "Don't touch the deity and pollute it. Don't come to the temple. Udupa will be back tomorrow or the day after. After he comes, we'll decide ..." Then everything was engulfed in silence. I must have sat in the darkness for a long time. I don't know when I fell asleep.

I woke up with a start to find myself sleeping on a mattress. I was covered. When I felt around me, Yamunakka was not there. I was afraid. I called out to Yamunakka. I went over to the yard and looked—she was not there. I went over near the well and started to cry. Where did Yamunakka go after putting me to bed? I got angry with her. At a distance I could see the *chavadi* of a house; some people were sitting where around a lantern and talking. I didn't know what time it was. Was it just after sunset? Or later? Before sunrise? I looked at the sky. There were stars. And as it had been many days since I had last said my *japa*, I didn't even know the day, the date or the day's star. I was afraid it was new moon. I remembered the *brahma rakshasa*. Where did this Yamunakka go? She has abandoned me—I cried and cried and stood leaning against the wall of the well. I stood up with a start when I heard: "Amma!"

Someone called out loudly, "Amma, Amma!"

"Who is it?"

"It's me Katira, *Ayya*. No gruel for me, today?" said a voice from near the fence.

"Aye, Katira, come here."

"I am not to come there, *Ayya*." I went near him and said, "Amma is not at home. Come with me." I thought, Yamunakka has again gone to that ruined *agrahara*, all the others would also be there, and felt sad.

Katira walked a few steps ahead of me. As I was scared by the silent darkness of the forest, I narrated to Katira all the happenings of the evening in a loud voice. I don't think he understood anything of it. He walked ahead silently, without even saying *hoon*. We came to the tank. There, some of his untouchable kinsmen were catching fishes, holding torches. He took a torch from them and said, "*Ayya*, there is a short cut here, come," and took me through a path covered with dense bushes. After we went some distance I began to get scared.

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Katira started to sing to himself. And as he was far ahead of me I couldn't see the path clearly. I had to bend down and separate the bushes apart and walk. Katira said *hoosh, hoosh* as he parted the bushes. Then, there would be the rustle of all kinds of creatures running about in the bushes. "Let's go back, Katira," I said and started to cry. "We're almost there," said Katira. We came and stood in a small open area. "Katira, hold my hand," I said. "How can that be, *Ayya*? Am I not an untouchable?" he said and walked even further away and stood holding the torch. I was frightened by the sight of the dark, tall, lean naked body covered only by a loin cloth, that stood glistening in the torch light. His shock of unshorn hair brought to my mind the image of the deity Panjurli. "Katira, Katira, aren't you Katira?" I asked. I ran up to him and tried to touch him. He put down the torch and ran away. I picked up the torch and started to cry. He came up from behind and said, "You lead the way."

As I stood in the middle of the little island of light thrown by the torch, I imagined the dark immensity of the forest to be inhabited by all sorts of creatures and shadowy demons that stealthily groped towards me. Wherever I put my foot down, I imagined that it landed on a snake. I walked on reciting the *mrthyunjaya mantra.* Suddenly, I felt fearless. Why should I be afraid?—After all, once the darkness is gone and light breaks through, I will see that I am surrounded by only bushes and trees. It is my responsibility to save Yamunakka. I'm not a little boy anymore. I've gone through my *upanayana,* been taught the *gayatri,* and am grown up. I felt bold. Katira followed me, singing to himself.

When we came to the ant-hill, Yamunakka was there, all by herself. She was reclining against ant-hill. Her hand was inside the hole into which the snake had disappeared earlier in the evening. I was not frightened by that sight. What to do now, if Yamunakka is dead?—I thought. The next moment I was shaking all over. "Katira, wake up Yamunakka!" I cried. Katira didn't move from where he stood. I remembered the wounded snake that had entered the hole. I also remembered mother telling me; a snake bears a grudge for twelve years, and panicked. Swinging the torch, I looked around my feet, picked up a long pole and poked it at Yamunakka. She rose to her feet and said, "Go away! Go away!" I said, "I won't go! Come with me!" She quietly came with us. Katira, without uttering a word, reached us home, and went away humming some song.

Once we reached home, Yamunakka sat in the dark without speaking. Then she said, "Why didn't you let me die?" I was silent. "I'm feeling sleepy. Come let's lie down," I said after a while. "I've

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got to go somewhere." I got angry and started to cry. "You come with me," she said. I said, "I won't. Send me home." "It's not so far. Come with me," she persisted. "*Ayyo*, I can't. My feet are aching." She held me close, and then applied coconut oil and massaged my feet. Then she said, "You sleep," and set out to go, by herself. I was too scared to stay alone so I went along with her.

In the moonless night the *agrahara* looked desolate. Not a single soul was to be seen. Just the two of us. A jackal howled in a nearby cane field. A shiver ran through my body. Yamunakka held me close to her. "If it's to that ruined *agrahara*, then I am not coming," I cried. "It's not there. I swear, it's not there." "Then where?" "It's someone's house. But you shouldn't tell anyone that we had been there. Tomorrow when my Appayya asks you, say you don't know anything and keep quiet." I said *hoon*.

After we walked a long while along the cart-track, we took a fork which led us over a hillock. Climbing down the hillock and walking for some distance by the side of the fields we finally came by a house. The light was still burning in the house. The school master who rode the bicycle was there. I was shocked at the thought that he would once again put his arms around Yamunakka's shoulder. He glared at Yamunakka and said, "Why so late? How long must I wait? Didn't I tell you to reach here as soon as it was dark?" Yamunakka didn't say a word. He called out, "Aye Parbu" and took Yamunakka inside. I sat outside.

It didn't look like a brahmin house and I felt disgusted. This is the first time I've ever been to a house like this. After my bath I wouldn't even talk with the *shudra* boys. I hated myself for being there. There was a chicken coop in the yard. In front of the house was a large copper pot for bathing. Parbu stood on the veranda, spat *pichak* into the yard and went in. I, sitting there, with my hair tied in a knot, an *angavastra* around my waist, an *angavastra* over my shoulders, wondered—where am I? what am I doing there?—and felt sad. It's all because of Yamunakka—let my father come, I'll tell him everything and show her! I was angry. Someone stood in the yard and called out to Parbu. Then he came near the veranda and said, "Oh! What's this? There's a Bhatta-ru here!" I recognized the Parbu when he came from inside with a lantern in his hand. He was the one I had seen from behind the broken wall, the first time we had been there. The big man with a big moustache. He wasn't wearing anything except for a pair of shorts. He had something tied around his neck. Parbu tilted the large earthen pot on the veranda and poured some sour-smelling thing to the man standing in the yard.

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A woman brought some foul smelling stuff on leaf from inside and gave it to him. It must be that foul smelling fish that I've seen come in carts from the Kanara coast to Kudumallige town. Mackerel, they called it. I was overcome with revulsion. He sat in the yard eating and drinking. He staggered all over the yard, singing. Then it occurred to me that what the Parbu had poured out to him was liquor. I sat, mortified by the thought that this drunk might pounce on me. He came upto me, said, "Bhatta-re, Aye, Bhatta-re, Pooje-Bhatta-re" and giggled, *he, he, he.* I stood up. And ran inside.

There, they had laid out Yamunakka on the floor, naked. Only the place one pisses had been covered. Her belly was smeared with cow dung and on it they had placed an earthen lamp. And as I stood watching, Parbu gently covered the lamp with a bowl and said, "Let it be. Let it draw." Around Yamunakka were Parbu, a woman, and "he." I was frightened by the sight of Yamunakka lying down naked, with her hands splayed on the mat. I took the *angavastra* off my shoulder and covered her breasts. Parbu pushed me away.

I started crying, "Yamunakka come. Let's go home. I feel sleepy ... I am scared ... come." Yamunakka didn't open her eyes. "He" dragged me away. That woman, with her mouth full of betel juice, said something to Parbu in Konkani, then went out, spat and came back. She had no *kumkum* on her forehead. She had a head full of unkempt hair.

Parbu and "he" went out. I followed them. "I'll look after everything. You go now," said Parbu. "He" took some money from his pocket and gave it to Parbu saying, "I'll go right away to Kudumallige on my cycle. From there I'll catch a bus," and then he said some things in a whisper. When I heard him mention the word Kudumallige I was reminded of home and wanted to go there. As "he" climbed on to his bicycle, he said to Parbu, "Don't let any one know." "I'm coming with you," I shouted. "He" went away, as if he didn't even hear me.

The man who was drinking in the yard started to laugh and sing again. I could hear Yamunakka groaning. "Aha, Bhatta-re!" the drunk sang out aloud. Parbu scolded him and told me to stop crying. I called out to Yamunakka as I heard her groaning, "Yamunakka, I want to go home." Parbu scolded me.

I heard another voice in the yard. I was relieved when I recognized it to be Katira's. "Aye, Katira," I called out. Parbu threatened me and lifted his hand as if to hit me. I sat quietly. After sometime, Katira started to sing and talk to himself aloud. "Aye, Katira," I called out again. Katira came near and said, "Give me some more." "Aye

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Katira. It's me," I said. "I don't know," said he and staggered and stumbled away. I was annoyed that Katira did this to me. No matter how many times try to tell him who I was, he didn't recognize me at all.

Yamunakka cried, "*Ayyo, ayyo, ayyo ..., ayyo amma ...*" I shouted "Yamunakka, Yamunakka, I am here, let's go." Parbu came out and said, "Sleep now. You can go in the morning," then he placed a tumbler saying, "Drink." I said no. "It's not liquor. It's milk," he said laughing. I didn't relent. I sat crying.

When I woke up it was morning. How early I did not know. Where was I? How did I get here?—I was confused. I tried to recollect. Sometime, long ago mother saw me off in a bullock cart from Kudumallige ... to Udupa's house, to learn the Vedas—that's all I remember. I had left in that cart, how did I land here? All over the yard chicken were running around. There was the sour smell of liquor. As I sat in the *chavadi,* rubbing my eyes, I saw a boy of my age in front of me. He had a cropped hair and was wearing a dirty pair of shorts and shirt. He looked at me; a brahmin boy with hair in a knot and wearing an *angavastra* and mocked—Bhatta, Bhatta, burnt a fowl; gave his neighbours a smell so foul. I sat flustered.

The woman I had seen the previous night told him something in Konkani. The boy got down to the yard and started chasing a chicken. It ran here and there, through nooks and corners, beating its wings, saying *cock, cock,* and eluded him. Finally, he caught it and held it upside down by its feet. It struggled for a while. Then it hung its head down and continued "*cock, cock.*" He took it inside. After a while I heard the sound of the fowl beating its wings furiously and cackling, as if it were fighting for its life. Then there was silence. I trembled.

"Yamunakka, Yamunakka," I cried. "I want to go home," I kept repeating these words, over and over again.

Yamunakka came out, slowly, groping and leaning against the wall. Her face was blanched. I ran and embraced her. She started to cry. Parbu said to her, "Stay for a while. Go when you feel better." Yamunakka held my hand and said, "Come, let's go."

I felt very happy and was excited at the thought that we were going back home. Yamunakka walked slowly, groaning and in evident pain. I saw blood stains on her faded red sari and got frightened. "Yamunakka, the back of your sari, it's all blood," I said. Yamunakka sank down right there. I too sat down and held her close to me. She slowly opened her eyes.

"Get up Yamunakka, let's go home."

"I can't. You go," she heaved a long sigh.

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"Get up, Yamunakka, get up," I kept pulling her hand, persisting.

"I feel thirsty. I can't. You go;" she said.

"I won't go, if you don't come."

"How far are we from home, Nani?"

At a distance, I saw Shastri and Ranganna come in our direction, along with the brahmins of the *agrahara*.

"Yamunakka—they're all coming, Yamunakka. Let's get away soon, Yamunakka. I'll take you home, Yamunakka," I said. I felt like crying. Yamunakka didn't get up. She let out a long sigh and said :

"Let them come, child. I can't get up and walk. Let all of them come and see. I ... here itself ..."

I shook Yamunakka, and said, "I want to go!" Yamunakka held me tight and ran her hand on my back, caressing me.

They surrounded us. Shastri pulled me away. I beat him and bit his hand. "Yámunakka, Yamunakka," I cried. Yamunakka sat with a distant look in her eyes, not noticing anyone. Tears overflowed from her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

I was very happy when father came and took me home. The moment we reached home, they changed my sacred thread and performed the purificatory rites. When mother asked me, I told her everything that had happened. "Dirty widow! why did she have to get pregnant?" she said. Didn't mother get pregnant—why shouldn't Yamunakka get pregnant?—why all this ruckus, I wondered. A few days later the news reached us—that Udupa had performed the funeral rites for Yamunakka while she was alive, and thrown her out of caste. Father and mother said what a good man Udupa was and berated Yamunakka as an immoral slut.

Sometime later, we got a letter inviting us to Udupa's wedding. I was revolted at the thought of Udupa, who was older than father, getting married to a little girl, and spat out in disgust, *"Thoo!"* Father asked, "Why, I say?"

"After that immoral slut had been sent away, doesn't Udupa have to live? Doesn't he need someone to cook for him? In all, these are evil times!"—said mother. □

Translated from Kannada by **Manu Shetty**

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POETRY AS FREEDOM

Ramakanta Rath

IT is not always that the freedom the poet sought through poetry materialises. More often, it becomes another and a considerable source of unfreedom, a whole system of oppressive and debilitating bondage. He must always live with whatever truth he outlined in his poetry. He may refine it, invest it with new nuances, modify its tonal complex in small details, but he will never have the strength to repudiate it fully and replace it with alternative concept. Moreover, he had used language in a very special manner in order to be able to describe his perception correctly and adequately; he cannot easily acquire a very different manner of using language. The greatest and most authentic poets do not ever write a poem and do not enter into the system of conceptual and linguistic bondage. Those who write must surrender a part of their freedom and operate within limitations.

At the same time, poetry is, essentially, a pursuit of freedom. The ultimate failure of the pursuit is of the nature of a superimposed fate and does not affect its quality. This pursuit commenses when the poet becomes aware that there are realities other than those handed down to him, that there are potential and relevant relationships which do not feature in the generally accepted list of relationships. He may, for example, simply gaze at the night sky and establish a relationship with a few stars. There is a likelihood that this relationship shall not perish and shall, at some distant and unforeseen moment, reappear with unbelievable intensity. Whether or not this experience finds direct expression in his poetry is another matter, but there is no doubt that the effort at relating oneself to far away things will extend the poet's consciousness to realms where other realities and other relationships occur. In this realm, things and persons the poet thought he knew are seen to possess aspects that add strange, fundamentally different dimensions to their familiar image. They change and, having changed, cannot be contained in the relationship that existed between them and the earlier consciousness. The exploration of these aspects, being an endeavour to expand one's being, is a pursuit of freedom. Whatever the poet achieves in language is a consequence of this endeavour.

But where will this pursuit end? Will it continue till the last day of the poet's life, or will defeat and despair dissipate it very much earlier? Both these possibilities are real. If the pursuit terminates

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prematurely, and the poet has years and years of humdrum life to live, he would be condemned to an emptiness and irrelevance he would have escaped had he not transgressed the ordinary world order. This life, in which meaning occured and was lost, is an excruciating experience which the poet must suffer in atonement of the adventure he outlives. But if he is afraid of this possible pain, poetry which aspires to describe the journey of consciousness will elude him; he will in short, not be a poet.

IN THE BATTLEFIELD

As dawn broke, I stood on a mound
and watched my soldiers marching in formations
to give battle to the enemy and win a kingdom
for me—a total stranger.
Watching them, I knew I was not among them,
I knew they would fight their battles and
I would fight mine all by myself.
I drew up formations in my mind
for the battle I would fight all by myself.
I forgot all my soldiers, their names and addresses.
I forgot their wager of blood
to give a kingdom to me—a total stranger.

On the mound, I saw my soldiers dispersing and retreating,
and I saw some—whose names and addresses I didn't know—
dying on the battlefield.
I saw the death of those who shared my years of exile
in camps installed where unknown mountains rose,
or on the banks of rivers I had not heard of before.
But the battle I fought all by myself raged,
and my heart had no room
either for sorrow or for despair.

My enemy had put on
a robe of lily—white compassion.
I was no fool, I knew
his robe concealed swords and arrows and guns.
I knew he had come
to conquer the whole kingdom of my future.

The unborn were restless
when they heard his prophecies, uttered

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in my own voice, my own voice
unaware of the meaning of words it spoke.

The other battle has ended.
It is not time yet for sunset,
but the battle I must fight all by myself
has just begun.
There is darkness all around,
and I stumble against carcasses wherever I move.
But I no longer worry,
for each of these carcasses is some destiny of mine—
unchanging and everlasting.

MURDER ON THE AGENDA

I know there is blood on my hands.
I further know my hands will be stained
with much further blood.
But to stand amidst the crowd
and throw bouquets on tyrants
was not my intention of coming here.

They will die someday. So will I.
And therefore, the restlessness of the night of unceasing rains
instills its wildness
into each of my days and each of my nights.
My life, clearly, is contingent on their death.
I shall no doubt die of the shame
of continuing to live unless they die quickly.

Unless they die quickly,
how shall I explain to the moon
the reason why my laughter has become a grimace?
How shall I explain to that faraway woman
the reason why I turned into stone?

If they kill me, they will surely manufacture a legend
to prove to people that my death had become so necessary
that, as soon as I fell, voices in the sky
spoke, loudly and clearly,
their thanksgiving for the assassins.

Whether people believe them or do not
is for them an irrelevant matter.
They have never cared to understand

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why citizens of this country pray everyday
that this life of theirs should be the very last
on this planet.

If, on the contrary, I kill them
it will be unnecessary to think up a story.
Even their own widows, in the course of their lament,
will never, never incite their children
to avenge the murder of their fathers.

And as soon as they die, I too shall go away.
But where? I have absolutely no idea.
Maybe that woman's face would lead me on like a star
to some place where the sword I had carried to kill myself
would at once begin preparing itself
for someone else's murder.

QUESTIONS ASKED BY THE PRINCESS WHO HAD VOWED NOT TO SPEAK

Tell me how exactly you died. Tell me everything.
So, finally, you stabbed yourself?
Tell me, did your grip on the dagger's handle grow less firm
after it was half way through your stomach?

Did you throw up your hands so that you could hold back
your breath that was limping away?
Did you break into tears?

What exactly was the time when you died?
Was the sky clear or overcast?
Did a wind sway the trees, or
was it as airless as this place?

Windows are never opened here
for fear that the cold air might infect the lungs.
You alone know how fond I was
of going out when it was windy outside.

I am therefore anxious to find out
if, when you were dying, you closed all doors and windows
and shrieked in terror,
if you pressed a bouquet of withered flowers
close to your chest and wept,
if you begged for a fresh lease of life,

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if you wanted to do what you did not do or
retract all that you had done,
if you wanted to come back here even if there was no air,
if you wanted to distribute yourself in measured proportions
among a multitude of reluctances
which were transfixed to their places for thousands of years,
which never changed their attire or voice,
which never acquired a little more courage when they threw
love-glances,
which always repeated their timid invitations to fly across the clouds,
and which always indulged in additions and substractions
in an accounts ledger hidden from everyone.

I know you will not come back to tell me how you died.
You will not come back to this airless house or world.
Here even famines are unreal,
and words die in the foetus.
I live here, in terror,
like an accomplice in some conspiracy
and keep my thoughts of you to myself.

I also know your eyes were not moist when you died,
and your grip on the dagger's handle was throughout firm,
and, further, that till the end,
you laughed and the birds sang in the same rhythm.
How else could you have died?
How else can I survive
except thus, that is, perpetually asking you questions,
and hearing your answers every time I open the windows?

LIFETIME

I made no enquiries.
I just gave away my lifetime to you.
What could be more inevitable than that giving away?
Your embrace was total, like death's,
Without death's terror or ugliness.

In you the sky was always blue,
the sunlight always tender,
the clouds always few and white,
the forest always resonant with the laughter
spilling out from the souls of homecoming exiles,

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In you the birds always sang,
and the mountains always sprang to life
without notice, and breathed.

I have never understood
What you are made of. Is it the courage
concealed in the hordes of our fears?
Is it the moonlight that shines on rifle barrels?
Is it that teardrop
shining in the corners of assassins' eyes?
Are you the time that stood
outside the world's doors when its streets
had a blood-wash, and its walls
had reinforcement from steel
and skeletons of infants?

I made no enquiries. I only saw
there were flowers as far as eyes could see.
Pebbles became rubies, decomposed corpses
stood up, shook off the dust from their bodies.
Lies were burnt into cinders.
Hands that did violence had become dust.
There was no sorrow left. Sorrows, it seemed,
Were mere tricks of the mind.

There were no evil omens
when I was drawn into you like a breath.
Owls didn't hoot at odd hours,
nor did dogs and jackals howl.
On the contrary, dreams of long ago
suddenly materialised, deserts became green.
All the world's orphans suddenly disappeared
from all the world's orphanages.

All the world's watchman disappeared
with all the world's prisons.
I couldn't see a single grey hair on your head,
or a single wound in your wondrous body.
How could I stay away from the death
in your eyes that waited centuries for me?
The moment I touched you my flesh and my veins
burned with the madness of ancient voyages.
Like a boat, I sailed away
in the unchartered ocean of your intimacy.

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THE SOLDIER IN EXILE

Sometimes I wish I should return,
throw this body to the ground before the judge
installed in all the marketplaces of my country,
and tell them, come, hang it
on your gallows of prefabricated words.

Sometimes I wish I should stop hiding among rocks,
and feeding on the sunlight and on the wind,
sail across the ocean's nights and days.
I would then unload all my bones
into the arms of the soil smiling at my homecoming
and tell it I have no further part
in its future.

I however hesitate.
The shores of my country would be inaccessible
with stones dislodged by vengeance and counter-vengeance
and with putrid weeds of mangled interpretations,
all its green and proud forests would have been burnt
by loud proclamations of conquests that never occured,
its body bleeding,
its railways and roadways and harbours shattered,
encampments of imported mercenaries
all along the banks of its moist eyes.

All this notwithstanding,
I sometimes wish I should return,
but some other times I do not wish I should return.
Sometimes it seems all my love is a moon
rising every evening and setting every dawn
in the sky above wherever I exist.

Sometimes, however, I wish I should return.

Translated from Oriya by the Poet

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Ashok Vajpeyi

THE WORD

A word touches another word
A word kisses another word
A word rests its head
Between two words.

A word penetrates another word
A word completes another word
A word plumbs another word.

A word dances even as
it moulds silence
into a quick infinity.

Words dwell in silence and
are at peace there.

2

Dew touches the green
quietly
in the sun a bud opens
roots knock on rocks
in the dark.

She rises
quietly
opens a window on
infinity.

A SONG OF SPRING

He passed this way
wearing robes of grass
reflecting an entire heaven
in his eyes.

He returned this way
wearing flowers on

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his naked limbs
reflecting an entire earth
in his mind.

THE BODY REVEALS THE BODY

Just as a tree
has its leaves
bark
trunk
roots
it has its own
sun
light.
The sun reveals the tree.

The body comes to
light
at love's touch.
The body is a tree
awaiting light.
The body reveals the body.

THE NUDE IN THE SKY

That nude stretched out in the sky

The moon has made away
with her blouse the
sun with her skirt
the stars light up
her bare breasts.

She is being taken
by the dark
redolent of grass.

She is being penetrated
by beams of light
like showers of
freshly drawn milk.

That nude stretched out in the sky ...

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SPACE FOR LOVE—1

She created a space for her love

She swept away the stars
put aside the moon and the sun
brushed away the branches
wiped the earth clean
and uncreased the heaven

She created a space for her love.

SPACE FOR LOVE—2

A desolated noon
A crowded evening edged by solitude
The third seat in a bursting bus—
He created a space for his love.

He drove the gods out
and made the birds
leave him a little
of their sky.

He snatched a flower
from the hands of a child
and borrowed some green
from a leaf.

He created a space for his love
in the middle of
squirrels and butterflies and sun.

WORDS AND LEAVES

A word too can arouse
a body just as
a leaf can
a day.

A BODY IS HEARD BY A BODY

Not by wind
nor by the sun
nor by the weary dark

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nor by the indifferent
sights and things—
A body's call is
heard, my dear, only
by a body.

Translated from Hindi by Krishna Baldev Vaid

COME

Come,
as darkness comes to darkness
as water meets water
as light dissolves in light.

Come,
Put me on,
as the tree puts on the bark,
as the pathway puts on
the green grass.

Take me
as darkness takes the roots,
as water takes the moon,
as eternity takes time.

METAPHORS OF LOVE

I propose
the first dew on the green
the last bird soaring and
merging into the blue
the red of the blazing recurrent sun.

I propose
words like roots
stirring in the dark
the suspected knock at the door
early morning.

The inaudible prayer of
the worms
I propose.

Translated from Hindi by the Poet

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NEIGHBOURS

Al Mahmud (Bangladesh)

WIND'S FOAM

Nothing remains, see, leaves flowers, village elders,
the river's dancing waves, brass pitchers and the
hookah's coal;
groups of growing girls one by one dwindle like the
ilish season,
yellow leaves in the wind on the rainless fields and
meadows drop rustling. The migrant geese go too,
their bodies like multitudinous bubbles
in the sky's blue cup.

Why does nothing remain? Corrugated iron, thatch or
mud walls,
the ageless village *bat tree* are uprooted in the terrible
Chittagong typhoon
Plaster cracks; as vast as faith,
with a great crash, finally
crumbles and falls the local mosque.

Sparrows' nests, love, creepers' leaves, book covers
fall torn and twisted. Bitten by the Meghna's waters
the harvest's green cry shivers to the horizon.
Houses, water-pitchers, cowsheds float,
and an old pillow, flower-embroidered, sinks like
childish affection
After this, not a dwelling remains;
water-loving birds fly, wiping the wind's foam from
their beaks.

Translated by Marian Maddern

REMEMBRANCE

Do you remember that tabooed night
its obscure sky
when to the cloud's opening
you pointed and

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said : See, God rides there
on a horse,
a heavenly image, cloud-formed and manifest.

Coition-content birds of night
made sounds
pouring on us in their language
deep scorn.
You unbuttoned your blouse
and your silence spoke :
Make me also like them
unashamed.

Translated by Sibnarayan Ray

POETRY WAS LIKE THIS

Poetry was the memory of adolescence.
It was my mother's sad face,
the yellow bird on a *neem* tree,
my little brothers and sisters
sitting at night around a fire
made up of dry fallen leaves,
father's home-coming,
the ringing of a by-cycle bell—Rabeya, Rabeya—and
the opening of the southern door
at the sound of my mother's name.

Poetry was wading through a knee-deep river
across a fog-laden path,
the morning call for prayer, or the burning of paddy stalks
after the harvesting, the lovely dark dots of rye
on the plump crust of a home-made country cake,

the smell of fish, a fishing-net spread out
on the courtyard for the sun to dry,
and grandpa's grave under a cluster of bamboo leaves.

Poetry was an unhappy young boy growing up in the forties,
a truant pupil's furtive attendance at public meetings,
freedom, processions, banners, the piteous story
of a fierce communal riot told by my elder brother,
returning from the holocaust a pauper.

Poetry was a flock of birds on a *char* land,

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carefully collected bird's eggs,
fragrant grass, the run-away calf of a sadlooking young farm-wife,
neat letters on secret writing-pads in blue envelopes.
Poetry was Ayesha Akhter of my village-school
with her long loose flowing hair.

Translated by Kabir Chowdhury

IN THE DARK ONE DAY

Returning home one day I found my favourite devil
blowing out the candle on the table. And then,
wearing the cloak of the dark, he casually walked
up to my bed and sat down, smiled weakly and said,
among other illusive things, that I was welcome
to visit the land of my lord. Crossing forbidden
territory, I arrived within a moment beneath the
beautiful wisdom tree. I said: this sharp dagger
is mine, give me supernatural courage, my lord,
So that I may use it to bring down the lovely fruit
and share it with the woman I love.

CONSOLATION

The more intolerant I become, the more I suffer;
beaten tracks burn in the heat of summer
and at dusk I return home wounded, bleeding all over.

The blood of endless suffering burns furiously.

then, like a tired whore,
The dark consoles me with an invitation
to share her loneliness. □

Translated by Pritish Nandy

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Sitakant Mahapatra

THE BIRTH OF POETRY

(five movements from the long poem)

Feeble, the strength of the *jeeva* :
a husband buffetted
by a hundred young wives.
(Oriya *Srimad Bhagavata*)

i

Where after all is the night
for so many dreams?
the day, for so many visions?

The tree stands rooted to its place
never dreams of walking away
never jumps the *lakshman rekha*
its laughter echoes in new buds and flowers
it weeps in the leaves
falling helpless in the wind.

Its roots go clawing through dark earth
like the sons of king
Sagara in search of the Ganga
the fingers of branches grope
and fumble in the empty wind and sky.

What a lovely bird comes flying
from some unknown country!
perches on its branch
and sings throughout the day
that seems many lives long
and in the evening flies away;
the tree pines for its music
waits with earnest hope that some day
the talkative one would return.
In waiting the leaves torn yellow and fall
new leaves sprout and fall again
the bark thickens and its life ends.

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I am that tree's childhood friend
the desperate courage that drives its cursed roots
in the abyss of darkness
also runs in my nerves, my blood stream
its perturbed despair and sigh
against the silence of the sky
rings out in the reeds of my heart.

How often have I felt
like throwing away everything as trash
and lift him on my shoulders
and show him around all the hills,
the oceans, disease, death and birth
the birds of many colours
and all the dreams of intoxication
the vision following vision
and days following nights
and nights following days.

(ii)

Suddenly I encounter that sparrow
on the shores of the Caspian sea;
it flies in, builds its nest
in my meaningless words
and starts singing;
with that the fleeting
autumn clouds of my words
turn into dark rain clouds
and bend down with the burden of meaning.

The sparrow forcibly unburdens me
of all my griefs and
piles them on its tiny wings,
the next moment it almost caresses me
looks straight into my eyes and asks :
'surely you are not able to place me,
I am the one
who lived in the eaves
of your thatched house
in the village along the river
and in token of friendship
often dropped tiny twigs

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and danced around disturbing you
even at the time of your examinations.'

The bird of my life
understands its language
looking into his eyes
it considers all wealth, all heaven
as utter trash.
When inside me the sun
swiftly climbs down the western sky
and I sense the farewell
at the crimson horizon,
when the mind and the heart are roasted
in the husk-fire of regret, repentances
he keeps on telling me
no no, there is dream
there is vision
there is no end, no pain
no grief, no death.

(iii)

What fleets away
does not wait even a moment
what stays but
never speaks a word
for them one needs words
the word without shape and voice
the word that is the yam
the cure the snake-bite of pain.
The evening keeps hanging
from the sky as
tiredness and remorse
are heaped on the heart;
finally, with red eyes, the sun
starts out with his stick and umbrella.
The Nile beckons
with its bewitching eyes
of a fourteen-year girl
and in a flash I know
it is not Cairo in April
it is river Chitrotpala of my village
washed in the full moon of April.

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(vi)

The sky is the word's body
the word floats in dreams
glides over visions
it embodies itself or is given shape
in passion, in death;
it creates the worlds, the *samsar*
in ecstasy and unbearable pain.

Who utters the word?
Who is the listener?
Whom does it belong?
it never distinguishes
between the worthy and the worthless
between meaning and unmeaning;
like clothes from cotton
who weaves this world out of words
through the seven melodies of the senses?
Who, who is that strange
and powerful weaver?

In the eyes of the word
the sun flashes
in its open mouth the fire leaps
on its wide forehead burns
all my unextinguished anger.
The whole sky is enthroned on its head
the clouds are its dark hairs;
all the poems murmur in its throat
and, as rivers, flow in its arteries and veins;
its pure white passion pulls
as death, as vision, as love.

Inside me the word gives birth
to all the bliss
that I will never comprehend;
it burns in my chest
as all pain, remorse, hidden tears;
in the broken temple of my heart
it shapes the incomplete god of love
without hands and feet;
it demolishes
all the games of the body

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in the child's play of dreams and visions.
The word is the deaf one
with one tiny foot
it covers the sky and the earth
its second foot spreads over
all the emptiness in between,
where is the space for the third foot
coming up from its navel?
In silence I bow down my head
for the tricky brahmin.

(vii)

With what unhesitating faith
daylong, nightlong
I keep on staring at everything!
In the eyes of mud and flowers
my endless births
suddenly loom, limpid and clear.

I am born, each moment,
in the corridors of its four worlds
enchanted by bliss and sorrow.

I am the midwife at the womb's door
when the tiny ant is born
I keep my silent vigil of sorrow
by the bedside of the dying marigold,
I am the pall-bearer
in that bird's final journey;
and when a plant's twigs are torn
I bleed.

I weep beneath the sigh
of the half-dead pale *doob* grass
a smile dawns on my face
when the sky gets its clouds
and the sparrow its drops of rain.
I remain, eternally chained, submerged
in all the life around
I take on new births
in the measureless greed
of the many-hued butterfly and die
in the unslated thirst of the little spider.

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I am reborn
in the intoxicated pleasure
of the flower opening to the sun,
and die
in the moon's grieving
as it sinks low
on the other side of the darkened hill;
I am reborn
in the ultimate despair of the breeze in early dawn
in the deep Om uttered by a sanyasin.

Everyday I die
in the tired remorse of the prostitute
after the body has been sold
I die in the crawling
of the earthworm, without any aim
in the weeping wounds of the leper
washed in bright moonlight.

In every letter of the word
I am reborn
my death is in its every corner
my life echoes, re-echoes
each moment, with its every utterance
in the seventh courtyard
of enchanted dreams and visions.

I become a kingfisher
diving into the waters of the word
as many *Dwaparas, Tretas and Kali Yugas*
file past
I go through many births and deaths
while its river flows within me
in the reverse direction
and from a distance
life looks as a pyramid in sand
the chorus of simple words
life looms as mango and coconut groves
bathed in the strange marine light
of dreams and visions
cries, whispers and smiles.

Where, after all, is the night
for so many dreams?

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the day, for so many visions?

DESTINY

A brief pause
in the rain throughout the day
the song throughout the rain.

The sun preened as a child
happy that he could
at least show himself
before disappearing for the day;
relaxed, he did not mind
rolling over on the dung-heap
after the long seize.

We too practise a smile
even as we perch
on the enormous mound
of sorrow and broken dreams.

Time with its stern discipline
goes about its job silently;
every morning it sweeps away
the remnants of our dead dreams
and the dying hopes
unto the dust-heap of forgetting
so that the sun
hiding as a scare-crow
beneath the enormous clouds
would once again rise.

SPRING

Too early, one morning
it arrived in that small town
without even a message.

On way to school
as on every morning
booksacks heavy on their backs
the school kids encountered him
in the koel song
heard for the first time.

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After the night's disturbed sleep
a lone old man sleep-walked
in the public park
step by tired step
with the burden of
dark memories on his chest.

Just up from sleep
the buds of the neem tree
rubbed their eyes
and looked at him almost unbelieving;
they seemed to understand his sorrow.

Birdsong thickened
on the enormous tree nearby
as a tiny bird in the oldman's heart
flapped its wings
eager to fly away

Suddenly the school kids too
scattered as birds leaving behind
a gentle rain of yellow leaves
descending on the ground □

Translated from Oriya by the Poet

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Chandrasekhar Kambar

DARK BOY

He was not like this before, the dark boy.
He was very modest. When I looked at him
He huddled up in the corner.
Each time he spoke he wrung his hands like one guilty.
He was a relative of mine.

Then, I was very busy, my head ever filled with thoughts,
so where had I the time to ask his name?
I had only said :
Let him stay at home and do household work.
As if blessed he had become ecstatic,
The filament of his eyes were lit
And when its dark light danced in our home
Truly I was afraid, I was most afraid.
Eyes can also be like this!

Even afterwards he was never bothersome,
Never did he talk too much, all his acts
Were calculated. Even when visitors came home
He never forced himself on them, grinning.

Even after the visitors had left, he never asked
Who they were or anything about them,
But continued quietly with his work,
As if those who had come had never come.

2

Till now I had never seen him properly.
But now when my vision has dimmed I look at him:
Like a shadow or darkness frozen into a black mass
He has become corpulent as a butcher!

All is different when young—
The shadow that hid shrunken under the foot
Now in the evening all of a sudden a giant

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Something like someone getting up right in front of your eyes!
Am I really afraid?

He has become too familiar now
As if intimate he moves around
Everywhere in the house without permission.
He tells me my childhood pranks and laughs
He even steals into the bedroom and narrates
The naked pleasures of my youth shrugging his shoulders
When I order him to get out, he leers and frightens me!

A few days back when I was asleep
He was sitting besides my pillow and writing accounts
Frightened I woke my wife up,
He threw down the pen, the book and looked askance at me.
From the fissure of his thick lips
Like gargling water and spitting out
He called me—traitor.
Sensing the time unripe to collect debt
He rushed out of the room!
The next morning when I thought
I should tell him his doing was wrong
Words never came out of my mouth.
Am I being defeated?

3

Am I defeated?
Yesterday, when no one was at home,
He came and stood in front of me,
Throwing the spears of his dark light on my chest,
And when he acted in confusion
As if to keep his foot on my head like a Jangama*,
The hidden space within me suddenly awoke
And as soon as it began to address the stretched sky outside

I became terribly afraid
Rushing to the Gods-chamber I shut the door.
In the confusion of darkness
I rubbed the icons of all Gods I found
But a golden spark was never let loose!

* A Jangama is Siva's devotee, his representative on earth; literally Jangama means a moving man.

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WE WAIT

We are dull Yokels.
To our dream filled eyes
We sprinkled the silver light of the sun,
Made them glitter
And when we entered this city
Celebrating the festival of colours—

We lost the sun who accompanied us.
We looked for him here and there.
Climbed high, higher
Called out friend ... friend ...
And searched everywhere

Finding him nowhere, we took him for dead
Lauded his virtues and wept.

Like the city's grin at our foolishness
The glaring glow of the lamp-lines.

In the meantime—someone like a city dweller—
A stout man stood in front of us.
Taking us to be a set of foolish waifs
He giggled speaking perversely.

We yokels, frightened, tried explaining to him.
But asking us to accept the mistake,
he grappled us tight.

He pulled out our jabbering mouth,
Our staring eyes, our fluttering nerves
Pulling out he pressed and squeezed
And pounding it with his feet
Made a slim sheet of paper.
With his yellow-urine he drew
Diverse pictures of currency notes,
Made a strange poster and
Pasted it on a high wall.

When the storm comes
When the poster edges come-off
Now and then our yellow souls
Are exposed and they search for the lost sun.
When we smash against

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The black window at the wall's edge
And gasp for breath,
The stout city-dweller
Reappears and pastes us again.

So for an other rain-storm to come
We wait and wait and wait.

THE CITY THE FOREST

Look, in between this city and that forest
A spider's web is woven
And so many paths have run across:
The foot path the crawling path,
The artifice path the intrigue path,
The leading path the misleading path,
Whatever
You must know its on these paths a living is made.

Look for example :
Inbetween the city and the forest
A snake river flows,
On its banks a huge tree,
In a house beneath the tree men and their cattle,—
They feign here as cows, there as tigers
The man-animal drama assumes an air of hunting,
On a lookout to devour each other
With piercing horns and whetted canines
A sea of million organisms!

Every one a tactician,
Possessed with all skill
To kill others casting a spell

And to live like lords.
But remember,—
They do not kill fully,
They only kill as much as required,
They only eat as much as required,
They keep within limits
And only allow to exist as much as required.
They make this honest way of living
A motto in life.

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2

Don't say there is nothing else here :
As the scene changes
In the fresh dawns, in the twilight dusks
You have straying pleasures on the bypaths.
Open your eyes and you'll be astonished to find:
The house lit up, the tree bloomed
And the melody of birds flooding.
At the place wher the river hugs its banks
And spills pearls of waves and froth,
You'll find a man becoming a child.
To catch a colourful fish with an angle and a bait.

Until when do you find all this?
Once darkness engulfs:
The lines like bypaths gone,
Nothing like the city and forest, all lie fallen.
The studded horns, the canine set,
The colourful masks, all removed, licking fingers
They dissolve in the dust of darkness.

What can the azure sky's star eyes see now?
Only its shivering image
On the river's heart.

3

The game becomes more interesting
When the moon appears.
The standing and the moving earth
Awakens in its dreams
When dipped in golden moonlight
That glitters moving aside the veil of clouds.
The warm dream binds everyone
By the same umbilical coil.
Now watch the fun :

The city dreams of the forest,
The forest of the tree, the tree of the bird,
The bird of the jasmine stars in the cloud clusters,
The star of the moon freely floating in the azure sky,
And the moon dreams of swimming
Like a salmon fish in the river!

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Did you forget the man-child on the riverbanks?
He dreams of catching the salmon fish
With an angle and a bait!

THAT TREE THIS TREE

There is a tree on the bank of a pond
There is a tree in the pond.
On the bank a real tree
In the pond a shadow-tree.
When the wave gets up
One shakes
The other smiles.
But remember
Though the tree-tops differ
Their roots are the same.
If you climb up on one tree
You climb down on the other
You climb up head upwards
You climb down head downwards.
Say you become air as you climb up
But remember the fate of coming down is
never averted.

Climbing up may be in your hands
But climbing down is never in your hands.
Its said all who climb up reach heaven,
We are not sure.
But the hell is certain for all who drown
You can check up whenever you want.

This story's tragic-error lies
In not finding the meeting place of
The real tree and
The water tree.
Therefore I say my friend—
Let's jump from the top,
Reach the bottom, come up
And search for the missing place. □

Translated from Kannada by S. Sugata

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Chandrakant Deotale

THE FLOOD

Both the daughters are asleep
The younger one with a smile at the corner of her lips
The elder talking in sleep
Papa, don't go out
Don't allow Papa to go there ...

Outside,
The water is rattling
in the belly of the wind
The water is rising
onto the shoulders of the wind
My brain is like a vessel
bobbing up and down
on the water

Take off your reason
like a saree and throw it away
shatter your fear
like a gourd crushed and
show it smilingly,
Explode the belly of the wind
with laughter
at midnight
the sickle and a sheaf of hay—
On the water
are flowing
so many words—

Tell Kanu
that Papa is here at present
But
no one can remain outside
forever—

The younger one has pulled up the sheet over her face
Mosquitoes are not advised
not to bite Anu
Disperse them ...

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ON A CHEETAH SUFFERING FROM COLD

The daughter asks—
Papa, what if a cheetah suffers from cold
where would it go
what would it ask for, and to whom
can it happen, Papa

I say nothing
lost in thinking
How tired the eyes are
watching the deep dreams of steel
How many heated days have rolled on
sitting by the furnace of bricks

Now in the daughter's imagination
this cheetah down with cold
would indeed be extremely pitiable

Now she asks
does the cheetah cough and sneeze
I answer—
yes, the expanse of the ground trembles
the valley vibrates
the forest is endangered
perhaps, everything will be consumed
in the forest fire—
She breaks into laughter
asking—
can't the cheetah ever apologize
surprised by the cure she has suggested
I say—
yes, this is the right thing
So you, the sparrows of wood
and wild animals of clay,
look,
today the cheetah is asking for forgiveness.

The daughter laughs
jovially,
like a flying sparrow
and says—
Come on, the cheetah is forgiven
now it is cured of its cold.

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Stilled by her happiness
I get lost in thinking
Now, how shall I explain to her
that the obsequious calves
become terribly violent
the moment they occupy the throne of power
and that this afterall is a cheetah,
how hungry it would be
once it is cured of its cold.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FATHER OF TWO DAUGHTERS

My wife like a papaya tree
I, the father, of two sparrows
which, holding the haystalks in their beaks
and huddled in the lap of the papaya tree.

Simply being a father of two daughters
makes words so bashful
This does happen in my country
that the poet-eyed father
starts reading the book of earth.

Hands play with the daughters,
likes dolls, in the lap
thinking about their future
the poet's heart
is overcast with clouds.

A FATHER'S AFFECTION DOES NOT SHOW ITSELF

Your still eyes
twinkle like stars in the night-sky of my loneliness

A father's affection does not show itself
It is like God
exhortations would however show themselves
like sharply-pointed stones

In the long queue of the fathers of the entire world
I know not my number, millionth or whatsoever
But in the world of children's garden blooming with flowers
you are the first in the front line for me
forgive me, for I thought in my folly and affection

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your colourful world would be safe in my shadow
but now that you have stepped out into the real world
I am happy, thinking
that your shadow is far beyond the fencing of my language.

RETURNING FROM DAUGHTER'S HOME

It's necessary to get back
says the father, in spite of himself, packing his luggage
The daughter insists obstinately
stay on for one more day, Papa
just one more day

As though a dry, rough tongue
licks in the sky
the father's being
Outwardly, feigning laughter, the father says, I've been here too long
and wonders how long this will continue
For centuries, daughters have been asking fathers to stay on
for one more day
and some day the father's ship must be getting wrecked.

While returning
the clouds of daughter's speech rumble
causing rain, bringing sudden moisture to the eyes
and within, the tired pigeon's throat is choked with emotion
The father thinks, protecting himself against moist weather and cold
the most difficult thing in the world
is perhaps returning from the daughter's home. □

Translated from Hindi by Chandrakant Patil

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Nilim Kumar

SNOW

Snow, you wail away in the moonlight,
I would fret no more.
Come down thicker on the roofs, on the saw-mill,
Cover the logs, hide the roads, make the portals slippery,
bite into the twigs with your liquid white teeth
and lean on a tall chimney to watch the beauty
pale as moonlight

In this expanse of whiteness
I won't look any more for corpses of stars
Nor would I wait for the stark trees

You child of winter
I'll fret no more
I'll rather go back now
and sitting on the molten window-ledge
I will weep and sip
a bowl of mushroom soup
that tastes silver.

THE SHOAL

Trudging along one day I'll make it to the shoal alone
Unending sand, heaps of sand, the dusty habitat
of the sandy wind
I'll break into a dance in the sand. I'll kneel down, roll,
bury my feet in the sand.
Put sand to my scars and wounds.
In the scorching sun I'll dazzle with the sand
I'll glow with the sand while the water gapes wide-eyed.

I'll be moist with the sand in the evening. I'll be cold
in the sad exhalations of the water.
And make my night-bed in a drop of my tear
The night through I'll sleep in a long hall of the wind
and below my nails, thiny sandbanks will sprout

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and one night a sandbank will sprout from below my nails.

THE TOWER

I'll sire a tower that will stand
At the bend of a love-story
head held high
in its tiny eyes two starlets
its short, snub nose will charm the grass
soft-winged birds will play about its hair
and the tower will fall asleep
in the light of the moon

Scorched by the sun and warped by the wind
the tower will stiffen in the cold
It's face will be lost in the mist
and, hurt and dying, I'll look from the distances

But when one day the tower will be sad
Wear my sins and look for its father
I'll come down the grains of my poems
and the tower will lean back on me and weep

We will thus meet at the bend of the old stiry
to love each other
The tower will sulk and stay drenched in the rain
that shower, that sad shower
where I was drenched with my thoughts

I'll be the indifferent father
of that tower
wrought with my summer thoughts

THE MOSSY EVENING

Don't you remember, even yesterday
we had munched a chicken-leg
in the evening of that old hotel, and the day before.
And here you come with the same offer to-day
in the same old hotel
in the shade of that same evening
the old leg of the same chicken

Don't you remember how we munched on
at an insect called jopiang

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its taste had got to my head
We discussed eugenics while eating them
emptying our goblets
at ease, on a first name basis with the evening

And while we walked stooped through the holes in the town
the evening, too, trudged along, stooped, after us
He flowed down our blood
and at the table, leaned towards the cavities in our teeth
and while we lit our cigarettes
he coughed knowingly in the smoke

While your bent knees made triangles
I saw your private parts, and the evening
caressing your thighs
Maybe he was a sodomite like us

Don't you remember the evening,
that old, mossy evening. □

Translated from Assamese by Pradip Acharya

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Ranajit Das

THE DANCE

Who has poured life in this small wine-glass
much in excess of what it can hold?
He must be a reckless drunk himself.

What is more, he has placed this wine-glass
atop the head of a dancing Negro-girl—
Who is constantly being provoked
by the hot breath and hard thighs
of her dancing male-partner, into
wilder states of orgy—

The whole universe
is watching this precarious dance
with centuries of bated breath.

THE MAKE-UP

Do your hair
Standing nude before the mirror—
For such is the mirror's
Nocturnal plea.

Near-lunatic light creeps up your legs

The air bites firmly
Into the suppleness of your neck and breasts

The mirror bursts into pieces

The violent lines of your arse'
Explodes with Picasso's rage

The lone candle floats in the air—
In the idiom of Dali.

A LOVE POEM

Amid the ruins of all human doctrines and wisdom,
the only sentence: "I want you" stands as the lone survivor.

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A primordial yearning that can neither be
rationalised nor annihilated. It is impossible
to specify the subject and predicate of this
sentence in the context of its true meaning.
Hence it is beyond logic and philosophy; its
entity is solely anchored in its inner pledge.

The word 'entity' denotes all life-forms
from gadfly to God. But none of these innumerable
entities is as absolutely uncertain as this sentence,
and in that sense none of them is as eternal
as this sentence. It has been observed that when
intellect probingly enters the domain of this sentence,
it undergoes a phased metamorphosis itself. Just as music,
when it enters the cave of lepers, is gradually
transformed into a sigh, then a cry, and finally,
a stiff-jawed silence.

All the above meditations are inspired by Haren—the eccentric.
Haren—the eccentric who knows what is
written in each of those scraps of waste-papers
that are strewn in the lanes and by-lanes of the
city and are aimlessly blown by loafing dust-storms
in a hot summer noon. "What is written in those scraps
of papers, dear Haren?"—you ask.
With deep conviction and yet in a slightly desolate
voice, Haren replies : "Malati Basu."

INTERNATIONAL

England sent me a volume of hardbound
Unwritten constitution.

France sent me a bottle of champagne with a note :
"Drink it, and embrace the nearest abstraction."

Japan sent me a little robot which can mourn
Human woes for two minutes.

Germany sent me a wrist-watch that indicates
Only competitive time.

America sent me an exclusive revolver that is made
"To assassinate the President only," but which finally
Provokes its owner to commit suicide.

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I packed all these presents in a coloured
Portmanteau painted with creepers and foliage
And set off for the remote village
Where my uncles live—

My sole intention was to walk, all alone,
An endless distance through the muddy village-road.

EGOMOBILE : AN AD

280-Egopower roars in this biomobile.
A soul-piercing Spanish bull. It's statue.
A Sufi mirrorhouse.
Starts on whistle. Geared to fun.
Steers with inner tears.
Fuel : Blood, liquor or saliva of the Black Widow.
The driving-seat has three options : instantly psychoconvertible.
A casino for doubt. An arsenal for reason.

And a cemetary for faith.

It's the lone winner in both the Grand-Prix of Pleasure
And the Safari of Pain. For the last 5000 years.

Model Hara-Kiri.

Having run out of fuel,
It still travels a farther 35 kilometres on a simple, genuine kiss.

Price : Deception. □

Translated from Bengali by the Poet

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Suresh Sethi

YOU MEET THEM EVERYDAY

You meet them everyday—
Ordinary people
Whose eyes, whose talk, are full of each other
And at the appointed hour they will assemble,
To depart for the hinterland.

Ordinary people
You meet everyday at the crossroads,
Their eyes seeking yours
An appeal, a bill, a handout

Ordinary people
Whose eyes, whose talk, are full of each other
And whose lives you dream are like yours.

THE REINS ARE NOT IN YOUR HANDS

The reins are not in your hands;
Over muffled eyes
You can only guess—
The intuitive tug of a leash,
The whiff of a wayside flower,
Bark of a solitary dog;
These are the blind signposts
On the long rain-slashed road;
Even as you pause to graze,
It is between one dream and another—
Under the threatening watchman—
The long whistle in the night;
For on this road
You sail like a cloud across the moon,
There is no direction or goal.

A TALE

In the No-Man's land where we disappeared

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with slim existentialist volumes, strings of letters
Our life retrenched in silence of beams
on opposite shores, piled with shavings
of seasons.

One day we shall wake up from this search
of focal point, and crash home like a satellite
with a belly full of data, using
more than could be proved

And then

in lengthening shadows, our mothers will haunt
us, with simple answers blown clear
like the conch at dawn. □

Translated from Punjabi by the Poet

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Ram Singh Chahal

GROWER

He who grows wheat
But have to buy it to eat
is called a grower—
in our land.

THE TALE OF THE TURBAN

'I belong to no cult'—
he declared repeatedly.
His neutrality had been the talk of the village
But now-a-days
whenever he walks turbaned
or without turban
he feels linked, or others link him to
one or the other cult.
He thinks, then,
that it is wise to walk sans head—
now-a-days.

WOMAN

I am a thirsty
stream searching for a sea
But there is no smell of sea in the air
Perhaps all the seas have turned into pools and ponds.

BULLET AND BREAD

The one
who invented the bullet
might not have liked
someone relishing his meals.
A child flying kite
Might have proved too much to
his nerves.

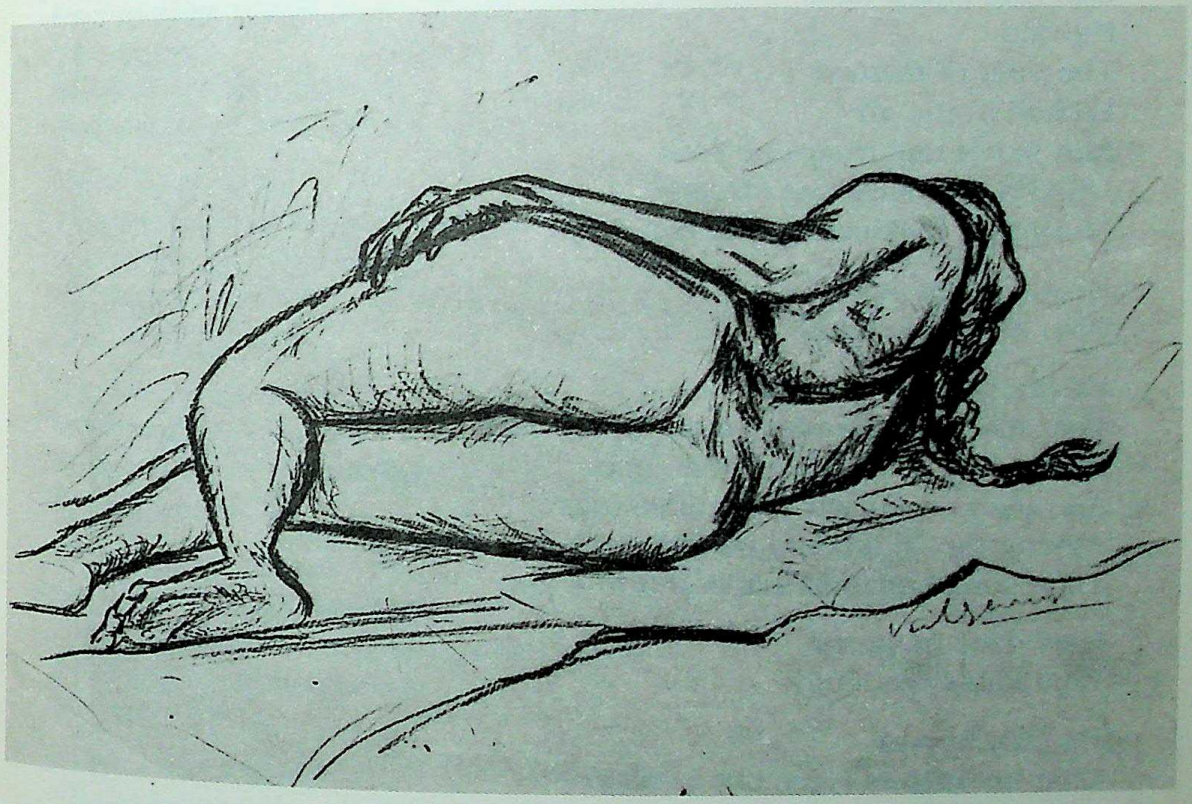
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A family sleeping quietly at home,
a farmer happily sowing his wheat :
Perhaps
he could have liked all this
but for his chancing upon a bullet
while desperately searching for ways
to earn bread.

□

Translated from Punjabi by Sidhu Damdami



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Sidhu Damdami

WRONGLY ARRESTED

How does he know
Who killed the king?

He only knows
That a blinding storm of slogans
Carrying sharp nails
Howled
The dust of terror
Eddied in the air
And in his nightmare he saw
DEATH patrolling the streets
Mummies barricading the highways

How does he know
Who killed the king?

He knows only
That the masquerades standing on cross-roads
Distributed tridents, swords, guns
And badges of their respective *dals*
Among the frightened people fleeing to their homes
Then somebody just handed him a gun

How does he know
Who killed the king?

He only knows
That his fingers were not familiar
With the trigger and butt of the gun
But carried a genetic itch
For the notes of *bansuri*
So he cut off the barrel of the gun
And turned it into a *bansuri*

How does he know
Who killed the king?

He knows only

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When to play that *bansuri*
He breathed a sigh into it
It started crying like a bird
Being roasted alive

Then and there he was arrested
On the charges of making joy
When the nation is in mourning

How does he know
Who killed the king?

THE MOTHERS PRAY

In the quest of pleasure
We melt and mould
Our worldly pains
Into swords,
Sometimes into poems,
And mothers pray for us

They wrap us in
The armours of their blessings,
Set us on the dark fort
To liberate the fire,
Man or some soul

Routed we return;
With magic ointment
They dress our wounded
Bodies and souls

Plant victory-kisses
On our defeated foreheads
Move themselves into unnoticed nooks
To weep their hearts out
And pray for us

When in our sleep
Studs repeatedly chase fillies
And we brim with sex
Like hard-skinned fruits
Full with sweet juice
Mothers just vanish
But before that

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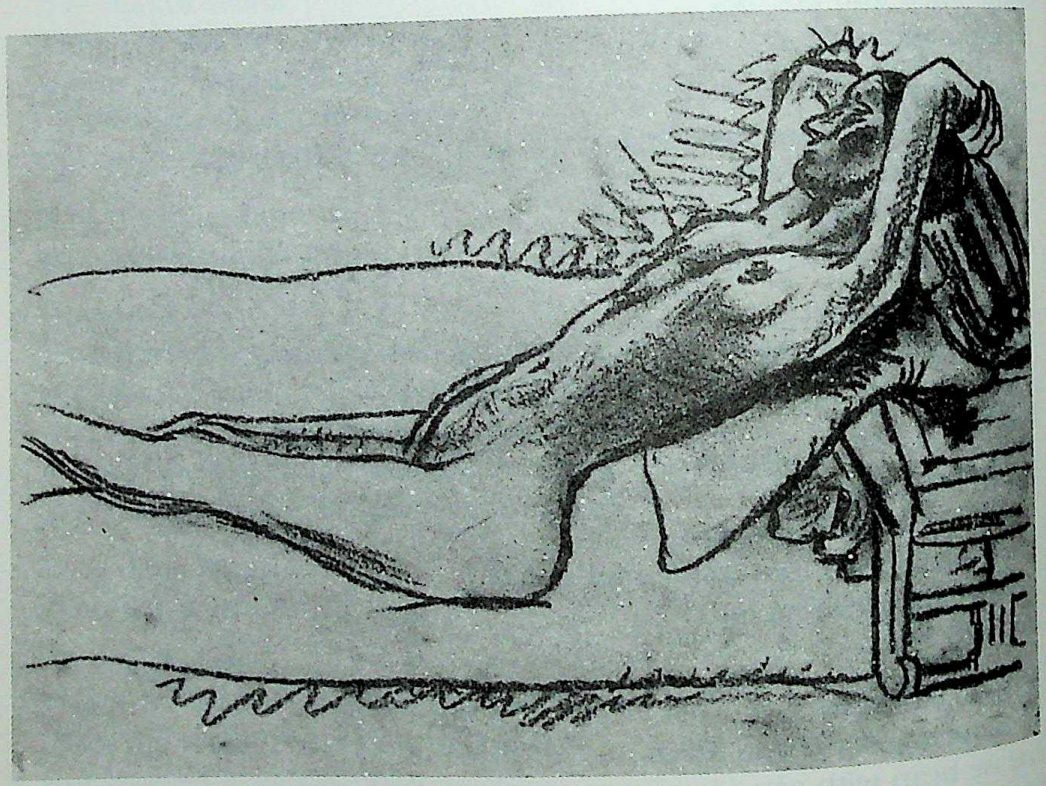
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They conjure up for us
The horny women
Burning to become mothers

Start sprouting our seeds
And the mothers pray

The presence of these mothers
Praying for us since ages
Can only be felt
If we will it
Not otherwise.

Translated from Punjabi by the Poet



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Jaswant Deed

MUST BE SOMEWHERE

You just come
I'll tell you
how I reached you
by traversing deserts, tunnels and mountains.
I'll show you
the history-sheets of all those males
who came claiming to give me the ever lasting bliss
but quit leaving a curse on my maiden breath.
They entered talking solely about soul
but left with pieces of my body.

You come over
I'll show you that portion of the woman's soul
that never dies with the male's exit.

And she goes on preserving it for the male
who is nowhere
Now I have decided to avenge
my defeats and my past life
And make you the last man of my life

Do come
I'll whisper in your ear the wake-up-time
Before you fall asleep
On your waking
I'll get my maiden breath freed from the curse.
And search crazily, in you, my male—
who must be somewhere. □

Translated from Punjabi by Sidhu Damdami

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Minder

1

I was neither the passenger of the plane
nor the dweller of the village
where it fell
Yet
trampled under the wreckage of the plane
the blades of grass
find fault with
my relationship with the machine.

2

When
a printed line of words
revealed to me
that even a cry carries a colour
I fell out of the book

3

Do you know any mirror
that can exist without you?

4

"Sand
is the harbinger of the desert",
said the saint.
And
you started searching for
a desert sans sand.

5

While disrobing
the river got frightened

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by noon-shadows
falling on the hearths in the village
And loneliness
shouted to the river
"Come away from the noon
I am to cross you."

□

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Gul Chauhan

STING OF RAIN

Rain bites me
like a cobra

Body changes colour, restlessly
Sky starts swelling within
Soot-dark cranes of old and new pains
start fluttering

Rain bites me
like a cobra

Hands fidget to talk to
someone else's
A moist-eyed thought
replays my memory to
a lush green jungle—
aflame in moonlit night
A baby awake in the middle of a nightmare
starts crying for mom.

A moment of power-failure
that snatches my book from my hands
stares at me.

Rain bites me
like a cobra

Reduces me to a vacuum—
dense and dark.

BECKONING

The roar
from the dark ocean of night
comes closer.
Every evening
I start catching mysterious signals—

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As the troops of darkness
take on the orange-coloured chariot of the Sun—
the gurgle of the flowing river,
the looks of intrigued women,
the haste of men returning home,
the byplay of
numerous nameless faces, voices—all
—all call me—

Another day quits
leaving behind in the book
a keepsake of an old letter.
And the road starts beckoning me. □

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Rajinder Kaur

1

I have accomplished
two jobs today—
Have torn a letter
and written a poem.

2

You walked one step away
and me too.
The distance between us
became infinite.

3

You turned into a prophet
by smashing statues;
By picking up their pieces
I ended up as a statue.

COMA

"Living and dying
both are
out of bound for you"
—you had
given your verdict one day.
Come and see for yourself
how from that moment
I have been in coma.

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POETRY AND COMMITMENT

Change in post-1947 Hindi poetry as reflected in the works of Muktibodh (1917-1964) and Dhūmil (1936-1975)

Mariola Offredi

THE choice of these two, by no means minor poets, has made on the basis of the perspective that brings together an aspect of their work: commitment. I don't use this term in a restrictive way, i.e., as the political commitment proper to the Marxist literary current (Pragativād). Following Muktibodh, by commitment I mean on the one hand the social message of Premchand (1880-1936) who, at the same time, stimulates the reader into a consideration of the problems of society and into the interior of individual life ("Premchand is not only the portrayer of society, but also the sculptor of our soul").[1] I will also extend the term "commitment" to the protest of the young intellectuals against the massification of the individual, its castration as a human being within industrial capitalism, especially as traditional values, that have been subjected to a severe critical and sceptical re-examination, are in crisis and the young do not have alternative values at their disposal.

In the period under examination, a series of important political events take place. But the most important event that inflicted a severe blow to the pride of India by destroying the illusion shared by Indians of belonging to a strong country, the guiding spirit of non-alignment, was the India-China border crisis of October 1962. This event produced a crisis even within the Indian Communist movement, with the subsequent birth of an extra-parliamentary Communist Party (CPI/M-L) in 1969, and of other Maoist groups that led the armed peasant struggle of Naksalbari (1967) and urban guerrilla warfare. In the meanwhile, the living conditions of the lower and middle classes deteriorated, and the devaluation of the rupee in 1966 accentuated the population's difficulties. Unemployment rose, above all

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among intellectuals. In such a situation, the petit-bourgeois intellectual had two main paths before him: political commitment, even of direct encounter, or submission to anguish, the sense of death, and morbid individualism. It is in this period that Anti-Poetry (Akavitā) flourished, along with the Anti-Story (Akahānī).

In the present work I have given some space to the morbid individualism of some anti-poets, in as much as they bear testimony to the reality of these years. This morbidity cannot be wished away from the literary landscape of the period by limiting ourselves condemning it out of hand.

Gajānan Mādhav Muktibodh (1917-1964), the son of a Police sub-inspector, typically middle class, like the other poets of his generation, matured within the notions of Chhāyāvādī individualism. The Chhāyāvād (literally : School of the Shadows. Freely translated: Romanticism—*circa* 1920-1935) was the first truly modern poetic movement in Hindi literature. Born around 1920 with the influence of the Bengali poetry of Tagore on the one hand, and from the English poetry of the Romantics on the other, Chhāyāvād was the literary response of the young Indian to diffuse instances of liberty: freedom from familial, social and political ties. For the first time the poet spoke in the first person in his poetry, against the literary conventions of Mannerism (mid-17th century—mid-19th century) and the arid poetry of the Dwivedī period (Ca. 1900-1920), product as it was of a Puritan ethic.

In any case, Muktibodh's work before 1942 (particularly from 1939 on; he began to write poetry in 1935 and short stories in 1936) represents, according to his own admission, revolt against Chhāyāvādi individualism. In fact, the so-called Prayogvād (Experimentalism) was the literary expression of this revolt. However, it did not limit itself to a passive rejection of Chhāyāvādī Romanticism but contested it critically. The poet turned himself into an intellectual, and created a point of view, that extended from exasperated individualism to immature Marxism.

Such youthful individualism kept Muktibodh away from the healthy laicism of Harivansh Rāi Bachchan, as also from his political commitment. It isn't a question, as has been noted, of a vision of great tolerance towards the different Indian Religious communities, as part of a secular programme. Such laicism is expressed in the metaphor of the tavern, where everyone is invited to consume of the same wine that brings men together. Further on, in Muktibodh's short stories, we often find popular ambients (above all tea-shops) in which the main character happens to be by himself or with a friend,

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and the description covers the Hindu and Muslim clientele, bringing into relief the internal and the external characteristics of the two communities. But this interest comes to Muktibodh not from Bachchan's laicism but rather from his sensitivity to the multiform aspects of life. If it had come to him from Bachchan's laicism, he wouldn't have directed his work along a well-defined path (it is generally the object of discussion between the main character and his friend; the author splits himself into two in these characters): sympathy with the lower classes, for whom he shows understanding and affection even when he describes their negative aspects, often transformed into the ridiculous; condemnation of the upper classes, and usually even of the intellectuals who belong to the middle classes, including the main character even when he represents the author.

From the mid-'30s, there began to grow two main schools of Hindi literature that embraced more or less all of the authors of the peroid: the so-called Uttar-Chhāyāvād or "Post-Romanticism", and the Pragativād or "Progressivism" or "the Marxist School." The Uttar-Chhāyāvād is fundamentally a school of poetry, the Pragativād fundamentally a prose current. But, in this period, prose is marked by another influence—that of psychoanalysis—and thus a group of *literati* is formed (above all of novelists, and the most important of them being Jainendra Kumār, Ilāchandra Joshī and Sachidañand Hirañand Vātsyāyan 'Agyeya' whose instrument of cognition is precisely psychoanalysis. Soon psychoanalysis attracts the poets as well, particularly Agyeya (1911-1987). Even though it is not possible to clearly draw a line between the *literati* of the different currents, one can say that, generally the Pragativādī, for as long as they remain as such, keep close to Socialist realism though in representing the relationships between men and women, or women within the society, or woman as a sexual subject, they often move away from this scheme. And particularly when they dare to face woman as a sexual subject (see, for example, the character of Śail in Yashpāl, who is, however a critical Marxist), psychoanalysis becomes their instrument of cognition.

Muktibodh, who also belonged to the Communist movement around '42, was never a convinced Pragativādī: in fact he is critical of Pragativād. His tools of cognition are two: Marxism and psychoanlysis. These two tools will never again be abandoned. But unlike pro-communist authors such as Yashpāl (1903-1967) who used psychoanalysis to describe woman's uneasiness as sexual subject, Muktibodh uses it to describe his own uneasiness. This is the individualist dilemma that we saw from the very beginning in his work and that

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will accompany him in a radical form, transformed into a desire for searching, putting into relief the impotence of the intellectual and of the petit-bourgeois poet.

Muktibodh accuses the Pragativādī critics of obtuseness and reproaches them for considering the struggle for Independence, patriotism and trust as progressive themes, and for defining sentiments like the frustration of the modern man as reactionary. On the contrary, Muktibodh maintains that it is the relationship between a sentiment and life that determines the relevance of the sentiment as a subject of art.

This criticism levelled against Pragativādī critics, has its origins in the concept he holds of man: "Man means man of the common middle and lower-middle class, who isn't even capable of buying sufficient food and sufficient education and sufficient clothing for his own children."[2]

The middle and petit-bourgeois sections of society suffer from marginalisation in all aspects of their life. Their frustration is a reality, that has been experienced by Muktibodh himself, whose life is a "life of the lower-middle class, wife and children, medical treatments, birth and death."[3]

Muktibodh is very attentive to the creative process and its relationship with the real. He divides the creative process into three stages: experience, fantasy, expression. In each of these three stages an organizing element is present, which he labels with various co-ordinates, each of them expressing a coupling of sentiment and intellect. These two, perception and the concept, perception and its interpretation, cannot be separated except abstractly. Even admitting that perception is a physical fact, the interpretation of perception on behalf of the percieving subject is a social or cultural fact. The two terms, *samvednātmak gyān* and *gyānātma samvednā* ("sensitive cognition" and "cognitive sensibility"), express well the inseparability of the various stages of the cognitive process, and, consequently, of the creative process. There is no interruption of continuity: "The interiorisation of the exterior, and the exteriorisation of the interior are a continuous circle."[4] Muktibodh differentiates himself from the Pragativādī when he decisively affirms: "However, art is a form of the exteriorisation of the interior."[5] He thus places the stress on the "I", on the perceiving subject, that, in his case, is "the man of the common middle and lower-middle class", marginalised and frustrated. And he draws a distinction between realist technique and a realist point of view. In realist technique "the object is represented, and it is precisely on the basis of that object that the subject is unveiled", in the "subjec-

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tivist-romantic" one "the subject is represented, and the object is placed in the background." The so-called realist artist can interpret the real in an inexact way, "looking at it through rose-coloured glasses", while it is "very possible that, within the subjectivist technique, which is the opposite of the realist technique, the perspective for interpreting the world be realist."[6] The stress placed on the subject leads to a shift from a sociological conception of art to a socio-aesthetic conception. This latter is much more complex than the former, above all when the subject, that is the artist, is the petit-bourgeois intellectual. He is economically part of the proletariate, but at the same time he has imbibed, through education, the ideals of the upper classes. Each of his attempts to establish new values leads to conflict.

It is typical of all of Muktibodh's work that there should be the presence of the friend: he doubles himself, divides himself into two characters who discuss and who sometimes totally and sometimes only partially oppose one another. This doubling is never resolved, either because this desire for search is ever present, or because he prefers the unease of the individual in bourgeois society :

... and, when
my head begins to ache
in the foggy solitude, critical,
I begin to climb the spiral
staircase of the smoke sent out by me.

And on every step there lies a corpse, slipped and fallen,
my old selves hit by the critics,
innumerable, past, lived "I"s.

Trampling upon their corpses, semi-corpses,
my foot that touches everything,
my present,
tied to the hand of the future, begins to walk with me.
(...)

Until now,
the universe that had agitated my mind,
the grey map of a tottering world,
shines in the full darkness of pain,
a continent formed in time.
In it useless new questions crowd together;
tired, tottering, it's the moment for going on;
screeching of the centuries that hurt;
among egoisms that bang against one another
the foreheads of the simple are wounded.
(...)

In that trip through the world, among the stones,
in a bent olive twilight
I found

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in solitude (like the light of the heart)
a house resplendent with light,
around it
some obscure trees
seemed finished, fat
very fat, great pains.
Suddenly, from the house,
a son of wisdom came out, simple, with a large forehead,
with the subtle face of a child.
He recognised me, and with a hidden laugh,
in my empty hands he placed
a glowing jewel—
the truth that I had searched for
wandering in the frightening void,
the richness that was within me,
transparent quartz of restless rays,
rays, critical,
sharp,
and their points suddenly
cut me, skin me,
without respite.
Because of this, my image
has been incomplete, unfinished till now ...

Where to go with it, this is the eternal question.
(...) (MUKTIBODH, *Ek-ātma-vaktavya* [A personal declaration])

"(...) we who belong to the middle class must exhaust ourselves in the energy expended in the struggle for existence. My long experience tells me that only those with a solid economic basis for their freedom enjoy that objective individual freedom (...). In order to render the economic basis of life strong and solid, there is also the path of the professionalisation of the individual. For me this is an extremely inappropriate choice, and I, at least, have never been able to accept it; but that path exists and the coercion of this professionalisation and commercialisation becomes ever more intense. The truth is that the principal time for the real examination of one's conscience, for the examination of his spiritual strength, the most delicate phase of that examination, is precisely the current era. This situation of the injustice of life and the environment generates a state of unease even in the inner world: and this is a hard truth. I must also say that this is my truth (...)."
(MUKTIBODH, *Ātmavaktavya* [Personal declaration])

The reader allows himself to be seduced into the labyrinth of his mind, and follows the author, searching along with him for an escape and often abandons him in order to break down the wall."

Who is this reader? Naturally, it is the young intellectual who comes into the limelight just after Muktibodh's death (1964), who, rather, comes into the arena of a revolutionary/rebellious movement against all injustices heaped together, both private and public, per-

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sonal and social. This young intellectual knows Muktibodh, loves Muktibodh, sometimes limiting himself to copying him, sometimes pretending to go beyond him in leaving the darkness in which the model was racked behind the distance that separates man from man :

> "(...) the individual continues to walk along his empty path. The intermediate distances keep him removed from all those warm things that, within the bosom, generate the diffusion of rays and within the heart, provoke a profound tumult. The result is that the creative force of man's determination is torn apart like a rag. Man doesn't fear difficulty, but feels worn out having been defeated by staleness, by his own sterility. In order to understand what I am saying, all you have to do is to think of the frightful indifference that man sometimes feels after having chatted for four hours at the cafe."

(MUKTIBODH, unpublished fragment from *Vipātra*, [The Unworthy])

> "(...) Krishṇa Svarūp wasn't disposed to thinking that that 'rebellion' was only a rebellion of the intellect or of the way of living. Because if it had been such a rebellion, they wouldn't have limited themselves to criticism but would also have created. (...) But here there was only negation, both in the area of action and that of the intellect. That is, they knew very well what they didn't want; but they didn't have a particular programme for what they wanted, because none of them was, in reality, serious. (...)"

(MUKTIBODH, *Satah se uṭhta ādmī*
[The man lifting himself from the surface])

> "(...) The question is whether this reaction of his against capitalism, against the power of the rich, against his own mother, really conforms to a theory and an ideal. Negation, negation, negation: in this way, does he really do good for the exploited? (...)"

(MUKTIBODH, *Ibid*)

II

Very rarely, this escape from darkness is upheld by political commitment (and this, too is more destructive than constructive), more often, this darkness is denounced as a cradle of unhealthy desires that a society considered rotten constrains one to accept :

> A rattling smoke is above us all.
> Above all of us the darkness of the colours of space
> above all of us is death. Ineffable.
>
> From the swamp of decisions we are incapable of escaping.
> The contexts of decisions are false. Empty. In any case
> we love them without respite.
>
> With binding, without respite a falsehood. We are all committed.
> (...)

(GANGĀPRASĀD VIMAL, *A-Shrut* [Not Heard])

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A voice cracking itself
and
the scream of pain of a nude woman

have disappeared all the crowds of the eunuchs
have fallen asleep the arteries
are deracinated the surfaces of the face
and a night as black as a witch!

The guardians doze
the prostitutes sleep
in the swollen legs of the pyjamas
people go around filled with love
—sick people!

There's only one list of diseases—
hemorrhoids, anal fistuals or, because of gonorrhea,
flaccid phalluses dripping pus!

The women of all the sick are silent
and there is a tumult in the quarter
the quarters are going to the dogs
and on the ravaged faces of the people
the pain of the genitalia is written large!

There is panic in every voice
there is a corpse in every room

a breathless air
and
all the women nude, nervous,
change sides!

Ouff! it's very hot today
—very hot!

(JAGDISH CHATURVEDI, *Umas* [Sultry weather])

While Muktibodh remained a poet, with a strong sense of the necessity of regulating expression, the young threw all norms to the winds and breathed the air of freedom in the anarchy of the moment. Those among them who supported the class struggle shifted their centre of action from universities to country areas: many followed ideals of justice that only with great difficulty they would allow in their own households, perhaps giving their sister in marriage to an undertaker or gifting their father's land, renouncing commodities forever; in any case, at least some acted in good faith and paid for it. Those that preferred individual freedom—whose importance we certainly don't deny knowing how the individual is less free in under-developed societies—quickly brought out instances of sexual libera-tion. Even the young revolutionaries are often poets; but almost

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always intellectuals of the second category are poets—those intellectuals who foreground the private. It is particularly in this second category that we find the flouting of the rules that structure poetic expression : at least as a declaration of intent, because in fact even those impose rules on themselves. It is true, however, that these young people purposefully wrote poems different from those that they used to write as normal poets and called them 'anti-poems'. See, for example, two examples from Rājkamal Chaudharī (1929-1967)] the first one an example of lyricism and the second of an anti-poem :

> On the face, bluish wrinkles of the poison of books,
> in the eyes, long-slept volcanos ...
> it was in youth that these young women grew old.·
> (...)
>
> (RĀJKAMAL CHAUDHARĪ, *Grihiṇī: ek samānāntar chitra* [Wife : a parallel image])

> Seated with his feet on the dining
> table, Emu asked: With this heat,
> after all, why don't you shave once
> a week? Are you afraid of the
> roughness of Indian blades? The cat
> with long claws, licking the sweat
> of an April midday, said: My inte
> llectual friends take me into cons
> ideration. They know how to live
> in this jungle!
>
> (RĀJKAMAL CHAUDHARĪ, *Inṭelekchual* [Intellectual])

Allen Ginsberg arrived in India in 1962. The poet exercised a profound influence on the young *literati*, firstly in Calcutta and then, with his stay in Banaras, in the Hindi speaking world. It was not only Ginsberg the poet that struck the Indians, as Shamsher once told me : "I don't agree with him, I didn't like the idea that he had homosexual relationships. But I was struck by the fact that he ate with everybody, even the lepers." As caste is based on the principle of *roṭi-beṭi vyavahār*, that is on strict rules of eating together and matrimony, such a violation of the first principle of the formula (and thus more important in the mind of the Indian—the daughter, as is known, can always elope with her lover) represented for the young Indian a total rebellion against society. The other principle of the formula (the daughter) was, for Ginsberg, the violation of heterosexuality, and for the young Indians of this category it became a violation of the norms regarding marriage and, even more, the virginity of

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the young woman and thus an assurance of full heterosexual freedom.

Ginsberg's influence on Hindi poets is, roughly, of two types, direct (on those who have lived in his circle) or mediated and waylaid. In the young poets who have lived in his circle, Ginsberg's influence has produced the courage for social denunciation, while, when the influence has been mediated, we can see an attitude somewhere between the sick and the morbid Rājkamal Chaudhárī belongs to the former, and, to the second category belong among others, the three poets of the *Vijap* anthology (1967). Dhūmil (Sudāmā Pāndey 'Dhūmil', 1936-1975) is a poet in whom Rājkamal Chaudharī and Muktibodh are combined—mediated by his original poetic personality.

The *Vijap* poets—particularly Jagdīsh Chaturvedī (born in 1933) who concentrates on sex—express the unease of the private sphere, pushing it towards illness: and this consists in the morbid fear of woman as sexual subject, as prevaricator of the male :

> My breathing has been enclosed in a box,
> I have been shoved in a dark tunnel
> and the mouth of the tunnel is closed.
>
> At the door in the 'thunderbolt' position my lover is lying
> one of her hands is swallowing the dark and the other me
> (...)
> On the dry breasts of the lover where my blood is dripping
> a form emerges,
> above the breasts the sign of an arrow is formed.
>
> Resting her breasts covered with fresh blood on my chest
> she is piercing my breasts with her arrow
> (...)
> In my thighs, dropping the spittle from her mouth
> she has plunged a hot dagger
> growing like a tiger
> chewing my broken trunk and my thighs
> she is dancing throwing my naked corpse to crows and vultures
> (...)
>
> JAGDĪSH CHATURVEDĪ, *Kāpālik priyā*
> [The terrifying Tantric lover])

In the provocative overturning of the feminine ideal, the anti-poets bring to the surface even the most hidden hunger for sex, and *Obscene poetry* (*Ashlīl kavitā*, by Jagdīsh Chaturvedī) limits obscenity to the woman, making us believe that she is ready to conjoin with the dog in the secret of her sultry room :

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Heh ... heh ... heh ... heh ...
Heh ... heh ... heh ... heh ...

for a while she has been turning over
the virgin neighbour

right now the quick gasping of the pet dog
has begun to reach the ear.

(JAGDĪSH CHATURVEDĪ, *Ashlīl kavitā* [Obscene poetry])

The work of the *Vijap* poets is an interesting testimony : it is the point of arrival that cannot be ignored. Assasinations, death, sex, obscenity, suffocating atmosphere, characters of *literati,* devoid of all consistency, dummies seated in cafés : this is the city, in which there is no room for nature and its normal vital cycles :

Not even now have they calmed themselves down,
the trips along the path
the songs written on the stones aren't finished
the scenes cut into the grottos.

The buildings that swallow up men
suck
like a nepenthe entire cities
on the streets dead worms
and half-dead—holding up their own skin
faces deformed from birth held to the bosom
ugly bodies, zig-zag, hung from columns without bases
heated voices burning new Christs without respite.

Not even now has it calmed down,
the thirst of the licking tongues of the female cobra
the pythons wrapped around the sandal tree with eyes wide open
devour the green fields, the horizon—
and the blood stretching far and wide—
the sun, it hasn't stopped yet
(...)

(GANGĀPRASĀD VIMAL, *Ashamit* [Uncalm])

Falling to pieces, they collapse with a huge bang,
the mountains, sulphur streams
on the white foam of the falls innumerable strata of lava
erratic life and scream!

A city dies
and in all the alleys the poison of death is diffused

it has filled up,
this poisonous smoke of the mouths of the volcano

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the secure peace of this metropolis!
(...)

I laugh till my sides burst
(ha ha ha ha ha)
I like the aloe smell of corpses
the terrible screams of slaughtered children and of the mothers
whose breasts they rip apart
(...)

(JAGDISH CHATURVEDI, *Ek jighānsu kā vaktavya*)
[An assassin's declaration])

Rājkamal Chaudharī is far from the morbid gratification of the *Vijap* anti-poets. Ginsberg's influence on him, which was direct as Rājkamal Chaudharī lived in his circle, gives him the courage for social denunciation. In Calcutta, the young Bengali poets who had accepted Ginsberg's guidance, allowing themselves to be baptised the "Hungry Generation" (Bhūkhī Pīṛhī)—a more appropriate term than "Angry"—had not limited themselves to the revolt against traditional *literati,* but had even repudiated contemporary society, defining it as rotten and corrupt and expressing their own rage against the system in their compositions. Rājkamal Chaudharī, whose knowledge of the Bengali language was perfect, had access to Bengali literature, that was the first to open itself up in the 19th century to the influence of the West (and that had, also, always augmented itself with popular material thus assuming a democratic character). In 1964, five Hungry Generation poets were condemned for obscenity, and the movement came to an end. If the Hungry Generation was an avant-garde, it must also be said that it was mostly a passing trend, and the provocative intentions of the *literati* of this school had no consistent outcome. The desire for provocation attained in the Shamshānī Pīṛhī School (The Crematorium Generation) of the Hindi area, a total disregard for man, forcing its followers to hold a public poetry reading presided over by a corpse.

When Rājkamal Chaudharī came into contact with Ginsberg, he was already 33 years old, and therefore his poetic personality was already formed. He is an individualist poet, who, at the age of 18 (1947), left his petit-bourgeois intellectual family to undertake a long journey in the Extreme Orient. He returned in 1948, and in 1951 he married for love. Between '57 and '63 he lived in Calcutta where he worked as a journalist and a script-writer for Bengali films. In 1964, in Patna, he wrote his most famous work, *Kankāvatī 1964,* published by himself. Fifty copies were printed. The irregularities of an unconventional life-sytle killed him in 1967.

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Rājkamal Chaudharī's will to subvert the traditional values can be seen in the very graphics of his *Kankāvatī 1964* : while the *Vijap* poets, who are also anti-poets maintain the graphic form of poetry, able at most to lay out their verse in a bizarre way, Rājkamal Chaudharī cuts his writing up in uniform blocks. When the *Vijap* poets lay their verse out strangely, they do it in order to allow for more reading possibilities. Rājkamal Chaudharī, in cutting his writing up into blocks, wants to negate the graphic form of poetry. But not even he can attain complete negation, because precisely in cutting the words in such a way as to form a uniform block, he grants his readers more possibilities of reading : that is, basically he remains a poet.

It is however, true that Rājkamal Chaudharī, who chose a title taken from the myth, attempts to reduce each word to its literal meaning. The few terms that, apart from the title, have a mythological and therefore extra-literal reference, are used by him flatly, as abstract images brought together in an unconventional way and therefore deprived of symbolic content. This anti-poetry intends to bring man back to facts. And this is the way in which the graphic form serves in helping the author demonstrate the impossibility for man to transcend the common becoming. There is no being, but are only fragments of which man is made up and in which man lives. The author doesn't seek to evade reality. Modern reality is alienating, but Rājkamal Chaudharī doesn't seek to escape through ideals. He remains almost always coldly, sometimes critically, conscious of such a reality :

> In the dark I can't see the nose of the cat
> (who is drinking the hot milk), only its ey
> es. Each night at this time the electricity
> goes off.
> (RĀJKAMAL CHAUDHARĪ, *Ek billī andhere mē*
> [A cat in dark])

> The real cause of unhappiness is : money. C
> ompared with the past, it buys fewer things. I
> f a man sick of heart needs a Kaśhmīr apple
> what does it matter? Work now buys less mon
> ey than before. The only thing left for us
> to do is to shave in the morning. In the ev
> ening tea at home and gossip about the neigh
> bours. There are thousands of little commu
> nalist disorders to render history and econ
> omic civilisation renowned. There isn't a l
> ong war. Man is busy buying bananas, (and)
> as a link between the past and the non-past
> a little fly lies in the half-empty tea cup.
> (RĀJKAMAL CHAUDHARĪ, *Chāy ke pyāle mē*
> [In the tea cup])

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Muktibodh had begun with nature. In his work nature always has a positive function : it is never sad or ugly, not even when it is constituted by the excrement of birds, but it is always a place in which some form of life springs up. The same Muktibodh remembers the red evenings of the Malva region, and feels nature as a profoundly Indian thing, a free land in which the distances that separate men are cancelled :

> "(...) But my eyes were open to the outside. The panorama made of ponds and roads, of extended plain open spaces, and in them the personalities of trees yawning in various ways or still, showing the gentle, bowing, courteous and intimate aspect of Indian nature. Their intermediate distances didn't seem to be distances, but a land of amorous play and a place where people stroll. (...)"
>
> (MUKTIBODH, *Vipātra* [The Unworthy])

Rājkamal Chaudharī also began with nature: a nature that becomes sad, allowing itself to be dominated by an interior darkness, and which doesn't even constitute a font of memories :

> All the nights have passed of the birds with broken wings
> crushed flowers in the snow, no one remembers
> when or who had slipped
> into the hollow in the plumb-line of the mount
> (...)
>
> (RĀJKAMAL CHAUDHARĪ, *Vismrit parvat-nagar* [Forgotten mountain city])

Nature is necessary for Muktibodh. Even though his attitude towards it is different from Pant's (Sumitrānandan Pant, 1900-1978), to whom "natural beauty did not furnish only similes and metaphors, but presented itself in its totality",[7] nature is an ingredient of Muktibodh's poetry (in the same way as, according to Muktibodh himself, it was for Prasād). Nature is also the font of many symbols for Muktibodh: the *bargad* (banian tree), the pond, the cavern, subterranean rivers, glistening gems, quartz, etc. Rājkamal Chaudharī, on the other hand, moving from his first poetic compositions to anti-poetry, cancelled nature out. Not only because the atmosphere of anti-poetry is the modern city alienating man and rendering him a commodity, but also because he suspects the "very beautiful and pleasant description" of the villages. Nor does nature constitute for him a fixing point. Nature is sterile, in which the songs of the birds of a new life cannot be raised, as 'Nirālā' (Sūryakānt Tripāṭhī 'Nirālā', 1899-1961) had sung in the mid-'30s : "to the flock of the new birds of the new sky/give new voices, new wings."[8]

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III

We've spent so much space discussing the attitudes of Muktibodh and Rājkamal Chaudharī to nature because Dhūmil, an offspring of the two poets, also takes nature as his points of departure. Dhūmil is not a simple synthesis of Muktibodh and Rājkamal Chaudharī, not even partially. His difference from both of them, and thus his originality, is revealed precisely by his poetic origins. Dhūmil, unlike the other two a peasant, and always tied to his original village (Khevli, near Banaras), initially composed popular songs. The geographical area in which Bhojpuri is spoken has a rich tradition of popular songs : particularly *birhā* and *pachrā* and other songs of the lower castes have natural images of great beauty, expressed not through simile but generally through metaphor, and are very brief, like flashes of light :

Hi ho, towards the east I bow as the Sun is born
Hi ho, towards the west I bow at the light of the Moon
Hi ho, who made the boat of eight woods
Hi ho, who made the all-golden prow.

(*Pachrā,* song of the *dusādh* [swineherd] and *chamār* [leather workers])

This characteristic differentiates them from the sophisticated tradition, and in particular from the Chāyāvādī lyric that never reduces the natural image to a brief flash but voluntarily swells up around an intuition (see the famous [*Chhāyā*] The Shadow by Pant, that consecrated him as poet when, in 1920 at the age of 20, he recited it at a public poetry reading). Dhūmil's brief initial compositions have light-filled images, intuitions the poet never dwells upon smugly :

It swam
at great length swam
the sunshine, of the river in the fresh
water
and in the end
it got bored
it got drowned in the stones.
(DHŪMIL)

The dark, cutting from the sky
the birds hung
on the flight like kites,
has entangled them in the trees.
(DHŪMIL)

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Dhūmil, a peasant, received a technical education. Married at 12 to a young girl chosen by a maternal uncle (his father had died a year before), he had to interrupt his studies because of his family's precarious condition and had to find work in Calcutta, first as a labourer and than at a woodworking company as a "passing officer". For two and a half years he travelled in various forest areas, where he was able to observe the workers' conditions: "They are treated worse than animals."[9] He resigned from the firm in 1956 and went back to his studies obtaining, in 1958, an Electronics diploma at the Industrial Training Institute at Banaras. At first he worked as an instructor, and then as a supervisor for the ITI in various localities of Uttar Pradesh. He died in '75 after an operation on his brain to remove a malign tumor, leaving behind a joint family of 27 members.

Dhūmil did not have a classical education, and often wrote a grammatically incorrect Hindi : it never crossed his mind to use the ergative form. He would become annoyed when his limited knowledge of grammar and syntax was brought to his attention, but he didn't worry himself about it unduly and he overcame his inferiority complex, claiming that the world of the *literati* is limited to bookishness and that they do not understand man. He had traditional ideals : the joint family, the defence of limited land property, even a dread of communal eating (imagine his feelings, then, for free marriage). These are reactionary values, but they made him a psychically "healthy" person in the traditional sense of term. He couldn't feel the unease of a Muktibodh, who is always conscious of the distance between man and man: the village has no distances to offer the psychoanalyst; there are quarrels, jealousies, fights, thefts and brutal injustices, which are all easily identifiable. With his practical intelligence he, friend to Rājkamal Chaudharī, didn't see in his work either morbidity or fashion, but that anti-conformism that was part of both his life and his poetry :

(...)
—between life and life
the least distance
keeping he had to live
this was the reason why he
in one man's eyes was an adamantine man
and in another's,
vile

—one thing was clear
his every habit
was against the grammar of the world
(...)

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—he was hundred per cent gold
I won't say this
but it's certain that his personality
was grass
he, even under the house in flames,
was green
(...)
he in the jungle
would look for the tree
—he had, about wine and hemp and oboes and women,
seductive stories
—but these were only parts of those screens
behind which hidden seated
he wove poetry
(...)
(DHŪMIL, *Rājkamal Chaudharī ke liye* [For Rājkamal Chaudharī])

Even Dhūmil, around the mid-'60s, became associated with anti-poetry. His material is erotic in nature, but his mode of treating it is original. Like all anti-poets, he wanted to stun the public, offend its prudery. But his peasant extraction, his education and his contact with non-intellectual circles held him away from gratification. Above all, his unpublished verses prove that he was free from the sentimental obsession with women and sex common to the anti-poets, particularly those of the *Vijap* group :

And I, epiphany of Harishchandra
made my refusal absolutely clear
to my third concubine
—the person responsible for the child
that grows in your womb
now is not me.
(DHŪMIL, unpublished fragment)

A whore,
four men for her lovers
conceived,
and in the ninth month
gave birth to a son
the four arrived
for the naming,
began to fight over the name to be given
all of them insisted on giving their version
at that moment a 'mediator' arrived?
asked each one
when he had come to this whore
and all
said that
they had all always come regularly

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'Then it's all much simpler
he will be called Chaudharī."

(DHŪMIL, *Chaudharī*, unpublished poem)

Dhūmil's most famous poem, which has sexual relations for its theme, is *Us aurat kī bagal mē leṭkar* (Stretched out beside that woman). An early draft would lead one to think of prostitution, but a final draft, published in the collection *Sansad se sarak tak* (From the Parliament to the Street, 1972), while not easy to decipher like all of his poems on sex, seems to express Dhūmil's revolt against the prison of love on demand, that is against the obligation of reciprocal satisfaction between husband and wife. In *Grihasthī : chār āyām* (Family life : four dimensions) the sexual act is seen as mechanically functional to reproduction; in *Ekānt-kathā* (Story of Solitude) the sexual act is called rape; in *Us aurat kī bagal mē leṭkar* the sexual act becomes "miserable constriction" of the man who pavidly adapts himself to daily respectability :

I for the first time felt
that nudity
is a harsh action
against being blind

stretched out beside that woman
it seemed to me that hatred
and the candles, where they
had already shown themselves to be useless,
and of dissolved
words the shade
in the face of a horrendous beast
mutated, my poems
on darkness and mud and flesh
feeding themselves are alive

rubbing time
in order to cancel it
only rebounding bodies aren't enough
while our face
is exactly in front of the broken kitchen-pots
and the night
at that moment is not the path
when within us water-melons are being cut
but our heads on the cushions
have become stone
stretched out beside that woman
I felt
that the house
is made up of
the curse of small commodities
in which one is not allowed to walk around with shoes on

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this is grass that is green fear
(...)
stretched out beside that woman
(...)
it seemed to me
that it is not man's habit
to be a jungle beside a panting
swamp but miserable constriction
(...)

(DHŪMIL, *Us aurat kī bagal mē leṭkar*
[Stretched out beside that woman])

Dhūmil, therefore, even in treating sexual material that is typical of anti-poetry, is far from the morbidity that characterises the work of the three *Vijap* poets. In the poem written on the death of his friend Rājkamal Chaudharī (*Rājkamal Chaudharī ke liye*/For Rājkamal Chaudharī) he declares that he wants to inherit his courage of denunciation :

(...)
I, for all those challenges
myself, want to prepare
to face which for thirty-six years
that man in blind alleys
knocking at the door of hatred
he continued to be a scissors broker
for thirty-six years the root for the cure of venereal diseases
continued to look for, of prostitutes and junkies
in the jungle full of sleep
on the drawer of his blocked liver
placing his hands
he continued to throw bold words into poetry
and in the end—
not being able to choose the right patron,
indignant,
he joined the long-hairs
(...)

(DHŪMIL, *Rajkamal Chaudharī ke liye*
[For Rājkamal Chaudhari])

This denunciatory inheritance, which is also one of revolt against conventional values, quickly distances Dhūmil from anti-poetry. At the same time, frequenting Marxist literary circles at Banaras brings him closer to Communism. The Marxist literary critic Nāmvar Singh seems to have had a particular influence on him. After he had become friends with the younger brother of the literary critic, Kāshīnāth Singh, who was the same age as Dhumil, he created a world of two that recalls to mind the interior world of Muktibodh. But while in

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Muktibodh it was a question of an interior world in which the author and his double would hold a dialogue and counterpose each other, in Dhūmil this double world is external (the two often discussed together their projects, those of Kāshī rigorously in prose, those of Dhūmil in poetry). Not only this, though : while in Muktibodh the inner conflict never finds resolution and, if anything, prefers the tension to the search, (Dhūmil and Kāshī's double world, even after Dhūmil's death, is the locus where two perfectly integrated personalities meet. The same theme is elaborated by Kāshīnath in his novel *Apnā morchā* (Our front) (1972) and by Dhūmil in the 296 lines of *Bhāshā kī rāt* (The Night of language). *Apnā morchā* has as its theme the student revolt at the BHU (Banaras Hindu University) in 1967 against the decision to maintain English as the official University teaching and administrative language, but the main character is an old porter of peasant extraction, called Jvān, who invites the students not to waste their energy on a secondary problem, and to fight together with the peasants. In *Bhāsha kī rāt,* Dhūmil elaborates the same theme : language is a pretext to impede the formation of a unified front against hunger :

(...)
the hatred is true
in this city
or in that city
that is in my or your city
some astute people—
(whose cannibal tongue
has tasted the flavour of sweat)
for the discussion
rather than hunger
have placed language
they know that man
having fled from hunger
will move towards language
they have understood that—
when a hungry man is angered
his own fingers
will eat
(...)

(DHŪMIL, *Bhāṣhā kī rāt* [The Night of language])

When the Naksalbārī peasant revolt explodes under the leadership of the Maoist revolutionaries, Dhūmil is for it, and so is Kāshīnāth. The young revolutionary intellectuals who appear at this point in Dhūmil's and Kāshīnāth's work represent, from a certain point of view, a stage next to Muktibodh's work from which they take

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their cue. But while Muktibodh tormented himself with his inner conflict, these young intellectuals took up arms. First Dhūmil accepts them, justifying the use of arms ("the small cutting blackboard" also appears in the poem *Naksalbārī,* on the one hand because he was fed on Rājkamal Chaudharī's anarchic freedom, and on the other because he is familiar with peasant reality that he doesn't accept. Kāshīnāth, who is also of peasant extraction, without an anarcho-individualist literary background, suspends judgement on the revolutionary intellectuals while he justifies the use of arms on the part of the working masses who have been brutally exploited (miners in *Sudhīr Ghoṣhal*). But in *Patkathā* (Screen play), Dhūmil rejects armed struggle, even though he doesn't find a valid path of liberation for a country full of hatred that has become a jail for him; and Kāshīnāth, after the death of Dhūmil, is clearly against the young revolutionary intellectuals.

The peasant revolt of Naksalbāṛi under the leadership of the Maoist revolutionaries is a central point in Dhūmil's evolution. I have had the opportunity of consulting the original manuscripts of his poetry. I know how many times he had begun to rewrite *Naksalbāṛi,* and how many separate pieces he had prepared for this poem. Nearly all of these fragments went into *Paṭkathā*, the longest of his poems (859 lines), that he, in the index he had prepared for the publication of *Sansad se sạṛak tak*, had placed first, before *Bhāshā ki rāt* (in the published collection, *Patkathā* is the last and *Bhāṣhā kī rāt* precedes it). *Bhāṣhā kī rāt* was also the title that he had chosen for the collection; as we have seen, *Bhāṣhā kī rāt* elaborates the theme of the language from the same perspective as Kāshinath's novel *Apnā morchā.*

In *Naksalbarī,* the individual who does not want to leave democracy is seen as a person with confused ideals. He is symbolised by the jungle. Parenthetically, Dhūmil calls this individual or jungle a police "informer", a spy who has led man to hatred :

> Consensus?
> No, this is not a contemporary word
> don't publicise it among the above 18s
> —after having cross-examined the jungle
> his friends explained that the solution
> for hunger lies in sleep!
> (...)
>
> And on one side you, at the opposition
> troubled by unemployment and sleep
> And on the other the jungle—
> in the assassination after the vote the dark
> recognising. (The jungle is an informer)

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in his eyes
shining brotherhood
on whatever day the green of your face
without compliments, can devour.

Be careful!
He has brought your family
to such a point of hatred
that tomorrow even your youngest child may cut
the throat of your neighbour
all of a sudden,
with a small slate.
Am I wrong?

In the end ... in the end ...

(DHŪMIL, *Naksalbāṛī*)

We have seen above how many parts that Dhūmil had initially written for *Naksalbāri* then went together to form *Patkathā,* among which the following lines show how Dhūmil adhered to the ideology of armed struggle, explaining its causes :

A. in truth, here democracy
is a spectacle
whose life
is the language of the juggler

B. here Parliament—
is that oil-merchant's lot
in which there is half oil
and there is half water

C. under a single Constitution
the name of the palm stretched out
begging in hunger
is Gaya
and in hunger
stretched out of the first the name
is Naksalbāri

(*Paṭkatha*)

But in *Paṭkathā,* Dhūmil rejects armed struggle: this has been the natural outcome of nominal democracy, of nominal socialism, but it hasn't provided any solution to injustice, poverty, hunger, and the country is a prison full of hatred :

I often ask myself
a question, to which I don't
have any answer
and until today—

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cutting the jungle that lies between sleep and sleep
I many nights awake
have spent
I have folded weeks on weeks. Of boredom
I have lived
the cruel solitary and extremely apathetic moments.
Before me there is that same well-known darkness
there are the cold indecisive gestures of suspicion
everywhere,
there is a cutting silence.
Like the torment of the poor
indifferent and wheezing. Into the hatred
fallen the entire country
precisely as before now as well
it is my prison.

(DHŪMIL, *Paṭkathā,* Closing lines)

Paṭkathā is an original poem, but it wouldn't have been written if Muktiboth hadn't first written *Andhere mē* (In the Dark). Both are long poems (859 line for *Paṭkathā*, 1293 lines for *Andhere mē*), both are structured as plays. But for this obvious similarity, the two poems are different in intent in as much they are written by two different original poetic personalities some ten years apart from one another. Muktibodh, in *Andhere mē*, writes the history of his inner conflict, ending however in a search :

Of life ...
in dark rooms
somebody moves around without respite;
one can hear the sound of footsteps
again and again
he can't be seen ... he can't be seen
but he is moving around
in the magical grotto somebody imprisoned,
(...)
I look higher up ... the mountain ... the sea,
where I might be able to find
this lost
supreme essential expression of mine?
self-possible.

(MUKTIBODH, *Andhere mē,* [In the Dark]
Opening and closing lines)

Dhūmil, in *Paṭkathā*, traces the history of India through the evolution of his personality and the maturing of his commitment. But evolution and maturing don't reach their fulfilment : instead of Muktibodh's quest, here we have the falling back on unanswered questions.

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Muktibodh's "darkness" has become Dhūmil's "sleep". Muktibodh's "darkness" is the place in which is waged the struggle of the petit-bourgeois intellectual caught between the prospect of declassification and the temptation of respectability in the superior strata of the bourgeoisie whose cultural ideals he has ingested. Dhūmil's "sleep" is the space between states of consciousness, a space in which not even the unconscious acts. These spaces are a total void. If Dhūmil had wanted to consider it as the unconscious, he would have situated the sexual material of his other poems in it. Instead, from the very first lines of *Paṭkathā*, he declares he has left behind him that particular problematic, and comes out into the open, into the sunshine of Independence :

When I came out
in my hands
I had a poem and in my mind
an X-Ray of my intestines
(...)
After having become useless for women
it's necessary to look for another solution
to one's own boredom
(...)
I thought and of mental impressions
in the forbidden regions
precisely before becoming
prey to my own habits
I came out.
Outside there was wind
there was sunshine
there was grass
I said, Independence ...
(...)

(DHŪMIL, *Paṭkathā*, Opening lines)

But while in *Andhere mē*, Muktiboth begins with "darkness" to end with his search in a larger cosmos, Dhūmil, once he has come out into the sunshine, goes back into a sort of darkness, that is the darkness of the country. Dhūmil, it is true, had intelligently gathered that tension of conflict that characterises *Andhere mē*; but the collapse of the ideals that had shown themselves to be illusory in the Chinese border crisis of 1962 and the consequent end of the charisma of Nehru, blunted his commitment. While from his hospital-bed Muktibodh would ask after Nehru's health (Nehru died in May 1964, Muktibodh died in September of the same year), Dhūmil wrote from his hospital bed a month before he died :

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(...)
don't ask the smith
about the taste of steel
ask that horse
in whose mouth is the bit. □

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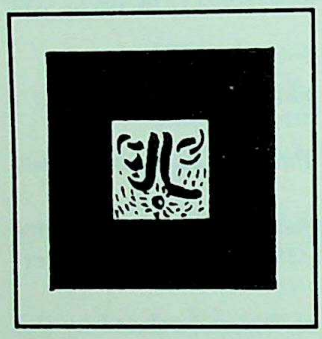
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Bengali

A NOVELIST WITH A DIFFERENCE

Ashis Sanyal



Shahjada Darashuko (Novel) by Shyamal Gangopadhyay, Calcutta; Dey's Publishing, Vol. I, pp. 502, Rs. 100/- Vol II, pp. 1160 Rs. 120/-

THIS year's Akademi award-winner, Shyamal Gangopadhyay, is a well known literary figure who made a mark in the early fifties of this century. He excelled in the depiction of the life of the common people, both urban and rural, with all its conflict and despair. At the beginning of his literary career, he had a close association with the 'Stream of Consciousness' movement initiated by a batch of *avant-garde* writers of his generation. He contributed three stories including "Yuddha" (War) to the chief organ of that group Chhota Galpa : Natun Riti (Short-story: New Style), but he honestly confessed in one of his writings that he has never been a conscious follower of that literary movement. His stories and novels are a faithful record of the significant social changes taking place in the post-Independence West Bengal. He said: 'May be, I lack imagination, but my characters always live close to my inner existence.' This neo-realist outlook or—in the language of Gangopadhyay—'magic-realism' has established him as a novelist and short-story writer with a difference.

Born on March 25, 1933 in a middle-class family of Khulna, now in Bangladesh, Gangopadhyay migrated to India along with his parents after the partition of the country. As a student, he was above the average and got the opportunity to pursue B.Sc at a college in Calcutta. But he could not continue his studies because of poverty and had to join as a worker at a steel factory to earn his livelihood.

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During that period, his first story entitled "Char" (Island of the River) appeared in a reputed magazine called *Agrani* in 1952. Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, the great master of modern Bengali fiction, was very much impressed by that story. It is a matter of great surprise that Gangopadhyay, till now, has not included that story in any of his collections. The publication of that story in a reputed magazine followed by the appreciation of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay changed his career and for the first time, he realised that he had the ability to be a writer. He did his B.A. (Hons) in Bengali from a college in Calcutta and resigned from his earlier job to join as a teacher at Mathuranath School near Calcutta. He started to devote more time to literature and since then he has never looked back. After a brief interlude as a teacher, he turned to journalism. He joined the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* as Sub-editor and worked there for a long time. Then he joined *Jugantar* as an Assistant Editor and now he is working as a Special Reporter in *Aajkaal*. He has travelled widely in different countries of Asia, Europe and the U.S.A. Gifted with a prolific pen, he has by now published eighty novels and three hundred short-stories, notable among which are *Keverer Bishay Ashay* (The Property and Riches of Kuver), *Brihannala, Iswaritalar Rupokatha* (A Tale of Rupo of Iswaritala), *Chandaneshwar Junction*, (A Station named Chandaneshwar), *Manusher Rahasya* (Mystery of Men), *Howa Gadi* (The Motor Car), *Sadhu Kalachand* and *Galpa Samagra* (Collected Stories). This great contribution has rightfully brought him a number of prestigious awards including the Bhuwalka Award, Katha Award, Motilal Award, Shiromoni Award, Tarashankar Puraskar and Bibhuti Arghya.

Among his earlier novels *Brihannala*, later renamed *Arjuner Agnatabas* (Arjuna's period of incognito living) and *Aniler Putul* (Doll of Anil) are considered by many as very significant in the history of post-Independence Bengali fiction. In *Brihannala* he has dealt with the modern problem of alienation. Through Sudha, the heroine of the novel, the author has depicted the life of a middle-class girl struggling for existence and the erosion of old values.

His third novel *Kuverer Bishay Ashay* was accorded a tempestuous reception especially by the youth for its fresh approach to life. The 'Fleshy School' of literature of that period kept novels and stories away from intensive intellection and disowned their socio-economic quality. But Gangopadhyay's novel was a work of intellect that reflected socio-economic problems. He has attached great importance to the existential outlook like that in the philosophy of Sartre. In this novel, the author has handled competently the eternal theme of man's

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vain quest for happiness. The mind is its own kingdom and like *Kuver Sadhukhan* of Howrah, man creates his own heaven when the moment arrives. In spite of shattering disillusions, man's spirit tries to keep its head clear of the waves of despair. *Iswaritalar Rupokatha* and *Swarger Ager Station* (The Last Station before Heaven) are based on the author's vast experience of the life of the common people of the South 24-Paraganas, the swampy forest region of Bengal near the sea. *Hawa Gadi* is another significant novel of Gangopadhyay where he has dealt with the socio-economic and the psychological problems of a motor car dealer. As a writer of short-stories, he also demands attention for the variety of theme and the superb style. In the field of literature for children also, Gangopadhyay's contribution has been substantial.

Shahazada Darashuko is considered by many to be his best novel as well as the most popular novel written by him so far. In this novel, Gangopadhyay has depicted the tragic life of Darashuko, the eldest son of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, son of a Rajput mother. The author has not used history only as a back-drop to paint the story of men and women. He is more concerned with the inner dialectic of history than the events themselves and this is one of the reasons why the novel is so relevant to present-day life. The life of Darashuko was full of variety. He was a Sunni Moslem by birth but the philosophy of Sufism had influenced him very much. He was moved by the dream of a common nationality for all Indians and a synthesis of the diverse elements, both in religion and culture. He laboured hard for Hindu-Moslem unity till the end of his life. He used to discuss the substance of religion even with the Brahmins. But he failed in his mission, and after the confinement of Shah Jahan, he found neither the Hindus nor the Moslems to support him in his claim for the throne.

Gangopadhyay has made history an integral part of the life of Darashuko and depicted the life-style of the Mughals, both men and women, in vivid detail with a rare stylistic skill. He has sought in this novel to express a philosophy which is very close to Sartre's existentialism. There are many characters in this novel and all the characters are painted with great insight and skill. *Shahazada Darashuko*, an epic novel in two parts is a significant addition to Bengali fiction.

AN EXCERPT

The startled Shahazada stood up straight. 'I have been listening to everything. The picture of Daulatabad appears before my eyes for

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a moment as you speak about that.'

The Emperor was pleased. 'This is what I desired! You will be a great soldier of future Hindustan—a great soldier—or efficient army-commander who can draw the picture of the battle-field beforehand. One day, you will also be able to do that, Dara—'

'Khan Jehan Lodi has brought down all the bridges of Daulatabad.'

'But in the last few days, you have seen Shahazada, how we have been proceeding so fast after reconstructing those bridges.'

'Still the ten forts of the South are not in our hands.'

'All these forts will now be occupied by the royal force. After these raids you will now be able to see your father—the Emperor of Hindustan—'

'This will be my good fortune, Emperor.'

'In the South, the annual revenue is around Rupees Five Crores. Even that has not been collected for the last three years because of Khan Jehan Lodi. Can Agra remain quiet after this?'

Shahazada Darashuko could not understand what to say after this. He kept mum.

'We have crossed the river Jamuna from the north-east on the way to Gwalior from Agra. Now we will cross the river Narmada tomorrow before dawn. No natural calamity will be able to stop the royal force. Winter is our companion now. Winter is the appropriate time for all major expeditions.'

★ ★ ★ ★

Hearing these words of the Emperor, the bewildered Jahanara looked up at that famous face. Looking at the eyes of Jahanara, the Emperor said, 'The Prime Minister was saying that in that magnificent marriage ceremony (Dara's marriage) you have borne half of the total expenses amounting to Rupees two lakhs.'

'I have nothing which I cannot give to him. I am his elder sister.'

'You are only one year older than Dara.'

'Even if I am older by an hour, I am his elder sister. Whom shall I give other than to him?'

The Emperor could not speak for a while. After the death of Mamtaz Mahal, this eldest sister had looked after her brothers. But nobody is there to look after her. 'Where are you taking this Oleander garland?'

'To decorate the bride-chamber of my brother, Dara. Where is that crown?'

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'It has been kept at the *Dewani-i-Khas* (Private Council).'

Jahanara was going away. The Emperor called her and said, 'Wearing this crown, I had gone to marry your mother ...'

'Is it so?'

'Yes, Jahanara. At the time of the wedding, Badshah Jehangir himself had put this crown on my head.'

'Today, you will also put this crown on the head of prince Dara.'

'Is it your desire?'

'This is not my desire alone, but yours too.'

'Are you saying this?'

'I am not saying this. This is the desire of history, desire of destiny. Put the crown on the head of the prince Darashuko.'

The Emperor Shah Jahan looked at the face of the princess.

□

Translated from Bengali by Durba Bhattacharya

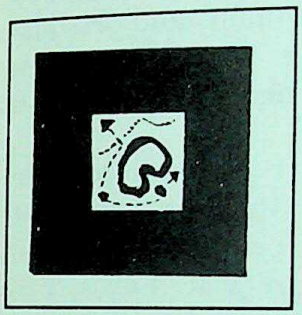
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Marathi

MARDHEKAR RECANONISED

G.P. Deshpande



Swarupani Sandharbha Vol. I & II, by Vijaya Rajadhyaksha, Bombay : Mauj Prakashan, 1991, pp. xiv + 262 and xiv + 278 respectively, Rs. 150 each

VIJAYA Rajadhayaksha is a major name among the women writers of fiction in Marathi. She has also taught Marathi literature for a number of years and has essayed some literary criticism. Her long dialogue with the poet Anil which appears as an introduction to the latter's collection *Dashapadi* demonstrated that although she is a distinguished writer of prose fiction, her first love is poetry. In a sense, therefore, it is only appropriate that she should have got the Sahitya Akademi award for a book on a poet and his work. First loves are at times more engaging than more mature relationships!

Mardhekar was easily one of the most important modern poets of India. He has also become quite an icon by now. To begin with there was some controversy if he could be placed in the canon of Marathi poetry. By mid-sixties his position in the canon was assured. That happened within a decade of his untimely death. By now he has surpassed that stage and has become an icon. In the last few years the present reviewer has seen three studies of Mardhekar. The only other poet to have earned so much of critical acclaim is Narayan Surve. Vijaya Rajadhyaksha in her study has meticulously collected and listed all that has been written on Mardhekar. Her own book is the third published work that this reviewer has seen or read about. Two more have been published or are on their way. S.P. Bhagvat's lectures delivered in 1979 and 1980 on Mardhekar have

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unfortunately not been published in a book form. But they were as important and as perceptive as a full-length serious book would normally be expected to be.

Rajadhyaksha's work is a painstaking study of Mardhekar, his personality, personal history and poetry. Her work began with her doctoral dissertation on him. But these two volumes are not just that thesis. A lot of work, collection of additional materials and substantial redrafting of her original work have together made this study possible.

This work follows a certain pattern. The first volume concentrates on the themes, poetic style, criticism of Mardhekar's poetry and finally its influence and the relationship with the tradition. The second volume opens with the discussion of biographical material and the roots of Mardhekar's creativity in his personality and personal history. It then goes on to discuss Mardhekar's aesthetics and his poetry. Finally it attempts to place him within the history and tradition of Marathi poetry.

A lot of discussion of modernism and modern poetry in Marathi has tended to be dominated by T.S. Eliot. Both these volumes bear full witness to it. The general thrust of Marathi criticism shows that there are three superstars of criticism, they are F.R. Lewis, I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot. Discussion of "modernity" that appears in this book is informed by the Anglo-saxon view epitomised by these three critics. The continental tradition does not figure at all. The two poetic traditions that the author talks about are the "western" and the "eastern" traditions. This raises a question which perhaps a book like this was not expected to answer. That question strangely relates to the "eastern" element in Mardhekar. There are influences of Sanskrit poetry as also of the *Bhakti* poetry on Mardhekar's poetry which the author has documented with considerable care and meticulousness. One can have some problems with her assessments when she tries to determine the extent and the depth of these influences. She cites Eliot's essay, 'Tradition and Individual Talent' but does not quite extend Eliot's observation in the same essay that "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones but with a feeling that the whole of the literature ... of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" to Mardhekar the poet as a historical point. It was important that Mardhekar's " historical sense" should have emerged a little more clearly in these volumes. Clearly it has not.

This may also be the reason why the discussion of "modernity" and "modernism" has been inadequate in this book. D.K. Bedekar,

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the Marxist critic (for some reason she calls him a communist critic) had raised questions regarding Mardhekar strictly within a Lukacsian view of modernity and his polemic against the moderns. This was however not a general Marxist view as Rajadhyaksha seems to believe. Presumably she is not familiar with the work of Benjamin and Adorno among others and that is why she believes that Bedekar being a "communist critic" (read, Marxist critic) argued what he did it quite "naturally". We have cited this example largely because it is really not possible to place Mardhekar in modern Indian writing without reference to modern western *literaturewissenschaft* (The Science of Literature). The strong point of the book is the meticulous care with which all available material on him has been brought together and organised. In the process this book has made it possible to see the tremendous presence that Mardhekar happens to be in Marathi Literary tradition nearly four decades after his death. (He died in 1956). The second volume gives all the details of his trial under the dated laws regarding obscenity. For students of censorship this material would be very useful indeed. Recently there has been a play (*Rajadarpana*) about censorship in theatre. There could be another about censorship in literature. This book brings together all the relevant documents connected with that trial.

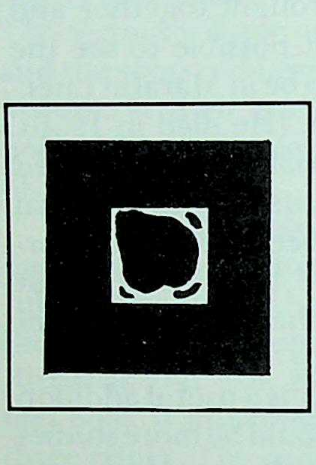
On the whole therefore this two-volume study is a useful addition to the Mardhekar studies. One hopes that there would be more studies giving us a literary history which, to borrow Walter Benjamin's words, "stands written on the countenance of nature as transience." Nature would here be specifically literary and Kant's view of nature as "the essence of that which is given" would be immediately relevant. May be, Mardhekar's concept of *vangmayin mahatama* (literary excellence) can be in the last analysis understood in terms of this Kantian essence. Some discussion of Mardhekar in terms of Western, especially continental, literary discourse would have greatly added to the value of these rather useful and elegantly produced (though very expensive) volumes. □

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OF LOVE AND PATHOS

Param Abichandani



Hathayogi (Novel) by Tara Mirchandani, Ulhasnagar, Sindhi Times, 1990.

TARA Mirchandani, a fiction writer, started writing in earnest sometime in 1949. The partition of the sub-continent and the resultant exodus of the Hindus from Sindh had a terrible impact on her mind. The refugee camps and the life there, the economic condition of the people, their sufferings and separated families added to the agonies of her sensitive mind. It was to unburden herself of this pain that she took to short story-writing. Her stories depicted the surcharged situation of the period, capturing, perhaps better than anyone, the condition of the aimless and rootless people and their hapless predicament. Identifying herself with the suffering and agony of others, she used her pen to work out an anodyne to alleviate their misery. She had no cure to offer; but her writing was a consolation. The artist in her evolved in the process. She succeeded in giving her characters in these early stories humanity and warmth. There was nostalgia gone delightfully mad, and the readers were happy to inhale it by the cubic yard. At this juncture of writing fiction, Tara's sensibility was well ahead of its time. She distilled with characteristic style and wit her own experiences of life and of the people uprooted from their soil to be thrown on an alien land.

Her short stories and novels turned more and more to the social milieu as time passed. There was always a sort of analysis of the

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relations between man and woman—their emotions, their struggles, trials and tribulations, conflicts and confrontations with the social environs as well as with each other. In the process, Tara grew up to be a major writer with her own style and technique, gifted with a unique and an original, if sometimes grisly humanism. One can touch the unhappiness of the whole world in her characters. The poignancy and pathos of the characters are taken to a pitch where they transform into a metaphor for the whole of mankind moving through time, struggling with its destiny.

Born at Hyderabad (Sindh) in 1930, Tara, a housewife, considers herself to be a literary disciple of late M.U. Malkani, a writer and literary historian of no mean repute. Her first book, *Kūmāyala Kalī,* a novel, was published in 1949. This was followed by three more novels entitled *Ushā* (1958), *Hathayogī* (1990) and *Lahiruni Jī Goonja* (1992). The collections of her short stories like *Āino Ain Aks, Rabara Jī Gudī* and *Dard* have also enjoyed a wider readership. During her literary life of 45 years, her works have been awarded many times. The analysis of her works brings out the fact that she rejects superimpositions and her characters are motivated from within. The author deserves acclaim for the honesty and skill with which she handles her subjects. And in this she has been consistent.

Hathayogi is a novel in two parts set in Varanasi and reveals the author's exquisite capacity for establishing her locale with imaginative description. It is a poignant saga of conflict between ego and emotions. Malu, daughter of a Professor, a child of four, is kidnapped for revenge. The kidnapper teaches her a few songs, gives her a begging bowl and makes her a means of livelihood. She grows up this way and years later, a college student, lured by the music of this sixteen year old belle singing on the *Ghats* of the Ganga with the accompaniment of *Ektara,* enters her life. Gradually, with his angel face and simmering languor, he brings about the surrender of the suffering girl, who, it seemed, would not easily break out of the prefabricated emotional prisons. With the good intention of saving this innocent girl's precious life, from the clutches of the devil, he gives her refuge in his house and tries to solve the mystery of her taking to begging. Her faded memories help him and his own intuition guides him, and he comes to know how she was kidnapped and forced into the life of a beggar by a weak, and greedy person burning with desire for revenge—too realistically appalling a situation. The girl's devotion and regard for the boy transforms into love. On the other hand, the boy takes her to be of trust in him and vows to locate her separated parents somehow and hand over the girl to them. Though his own

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mind is not free from the tender feelings for the girl, he succumbs to his principles, his false ego, and subjects himself to reason even at the cost of stifling the voice of his soul. He locates the girl's parents in Calcutta and hands over the girl to them. It is only after that the real struggle in his mind starts—the struggle as to what is good and what is bad, what is vice and what is virtue. Man is a simple soul inadvertently entangled in a blind mess called life with hardly a clue as to its meaning and no aid from a Seeing Eye. A real existential *angst*. Nevertheless, the complex human relations defy logic and in the end Malu's selfless love prevails over his ego.

Hathayogi is a richly entertaining novel which displays to the full the author's genius for creating pathos. Of the several strands in the story none is more moving than the unfolding of the mind of the child who has been given a begging bowl, and its sad denouement. It is the work of a sensitive mind slowly unhinged, a howl against the human condition. A little obvious one may feel; but Tara has never had much patience with furtive symbolism. Her fine fictional instrument is tuned perfectly to the dissonances of the times, and the unheard but strangely felt music of a seductive eternity.

EXCERPTS

I returned to Benaras Hindu University. I was given the same room occupied by me earlier. I had not only become a mental wreck, but I was physically sick too. My mind, body and soul were badly wounded, and it seemed I had to suffer mutely, for there wasn't any cure for the ailment I was suffering from. I had lost my thinking capabilities. I had already rid myself of day-dreaming. I felt as if I were a walking corpse.

In Malu's company, while giving her discourses on happy life, my own individuality had developed and my latent virtues of which I was not conscious before had surfaced. Malu, as she is now, is my creation. I always advised her to face the truth and acquire self-confidence. She took my advice as a Gospel Truth ... Like a true *Guru* I would watch her coming up and feel happy seeing her transcending. But the truth was that whatever I taught her, I had learned much more from her in the process. She was my inspiration—the peak of my evolution.

★ ★ ★ ★

And today ... today I am nothing without her. Only a zero which has no value—if all alone. I had left her, abandoned a friend, only for the sake of my false ego.

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I had lost the self-confidence which I had gained in our togetherness. All my virtues, all my goodness had vanished in the thin air almost overnight. I knew she was the only person who could return to me my lost identity, lost happiness and peace. I was confident that even now if I called her she would come flying. But I knew I wouldn't do that, for I was a slave of my obstinacy, my ego, false though. To give in was not in my temperament. Once I made a decision, I wouldn't retrace my steps.

I asked myself repeatedly as to what were the reasons for leaving Malu? Was I afraid of her rich parents? Or was it that I didn't deserve her? Or was the annoyance of my parents a factor that prevented me from making a right decision? But I knew these were not the reasons. None of them. Then what was that spectre that was raised in my eyes which separated me from her? Perhaps I knew nothing. Because of my mental turmoil I was not able to see things clearly, think clearly ... perhaps. Why had I become so impersonal? I had turned into a robot ... probably.

★ ★ ★ ★

The past exploded. The tempest of memories swept me away. Every moment passed in Calcutta hovered over my head like a vulture ... as if to prey on me. I saw Malu's face shimmering like embers. I heard her terrifying laughter. It reached me piercing the tempest. "Hypocrite ...", "Coward ...". The words rent my heart like an arrow and hurt. My heart bled. I closed my eyes.

★ ★ ★ ★

My inner voice said, "You worship truth. Why, then, don't you be true to yourself. Why don't you accept that she is your pain and that she alone can alleviate that pain. It's never too late. Go back to Calcutta and have your heart-ache treated."

I gave a start. I thought that this truth had remained concealed in a corner of my subconscious. My heart wept and longed for Malu.

★ ★ ★ ★

I pulled Malu towards me and held her in my embrace. Timeless silence pervaded the place. I realised heaven on earth at that moment.

Malu said sweetly, "We are going to Calcutta tomorrow. I have left my father there in a bad shape."

The consciousness crept over me slowly. I had forgotten my very existence. Malu got up. Kissing me, she said, "Let's take some rest now. We have a long journey tomorrow." □

Translated from Sindhi by Param Abichandani

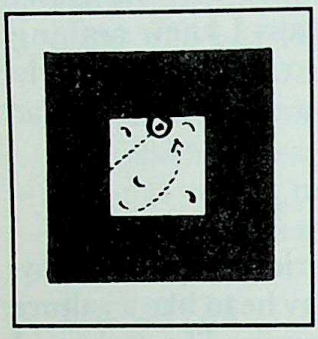
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Tamil

BEYOND REALISM

Venkat Swaminathan



Kaadugal (Novel) by M.V. Vekatram; Sivagangi; Annam, 1992, pp. 152, Rs. 35/-

THE presence of M.V. Venkatram in modern Tamil writing is an interesting case study. His writing career by now has spanned over six decades. He started writing at the age of 16 that is from the time he stepped into college. Those early writings appeared, not in his college magazine which would expectedly be the forum for a beginner, but in *Manikkodi,* a landmark of a literary magazine that gave the Tamil language its modern masters. Besides, many a writer of significant achievement in Tamil has confessed to the debt they owed to M.V. Venkatram as their early inspiration to launch themselves into their writing career. And yet, strangely enough, through all these six decades, M.V.V. has remained far away from the glare of publicity, controversy or even just being talked about. He has known neither critical acclaim, nor denunciation, nor public adulation, nor has he been at the centre of any controversy. Many a writer's fortunes have risen and fallen, many have emerged from oblivion, many of yester years' heroes have fallen by the way side during these six decades, but M.V.V. has remained unassailed, unruffled and has continued to write just what he liked. To what M.V.V. owes this to himself, to his writings or to the selective generosity or imbecility, a neglect benign or a 'can't care less' attitude of the Tamil literary milieu one does not really know. But M.V.V. is hardly the man to be bothered about all this. He would only be

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amused; one can see that in the twinkle of his eyes, the closed *pan* chewing mouth allowing the lips to reach out to his ears emitting a smile of condescension at people concerned about such trivialities. It is a remarkable feat defying any kind of analysis. Of late, of course in some of his writings and interviews, he has come out with his views on certain personalities of long standing association and closeness with him and he has dropped quite some bricks, hot and heavy. Normally, one would expect a storm to blow out and lash in all directions, but M.V.V. got away with them, as though nothing ever happened; there were neither garlands nor brick bats for him.

M.V.V's. range has been varied, covering a large spectrum of human existence, human emotions. He has written of love, of poverty and a lot of other things. He belongs to a community who had originally belonged to Saurashtra having migrated centuries ago to South and settled down in significant large segments in certain towns and cities of Tamilnadu. Naturally, he has written of this community too, the community of weavers, the ups and downs in the fortunes of this community in which M.V.V. had had his due share, continuing the family's traditional occupation. He has also written of the characters in the epics and the *Puranas*, refashioning them to his liking, particularly the female characters. The late Ku. Pa. Rajagopalan, one of the modern classics in Tamil, is reported to have remarked that he liked M.V.V.'s Tilottama better than even Vyasa's. That should have set M.V.V.'s head reeling. Ku.Pa.Ra. was M.V.V.'s guru and mentor, soft spoken man, reputed for his economy in expression and appreciation.

Above all these, there is one very significant strand in his writings which shows up at frequent intervals in his short stories and novels and this strand marks M.V.V. out from the rest of contemporary writing. For there is just not one to share this trait or distinction if one likes to put it that way, with M.V.V. This also speaks of the man, his grit and non-chalant attitudes. That strand consistently runs right from his early days through to this day. It would show up as a form of dream or illusion—in the manner of a Chinese poem in which the poet in a moment of self-reflection wonders and comes up questioning the very nature of his existence: "Am I the butterfly that is now dreaming to have transformed into Tu Fu or am I Tu Fu the poet who saw himself as a butterfly in his dream a little while ago?" M.V.V. has not perhaps even now heard of the Chinese poet. I myself tend to forget the name of the Chinese poet. I have used Tu Fu only as a filler in the quote, it could as well be Li Po or any other. I forget the title of M.V.V.'s story too. But I am sure here we have the hoary

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Indian philosophical tradition that enables M.V.V. to draw such images in his moments of reverie. Such mystical experiences could legitimately be the stuff of literature written in the period between the twenties and the forties, a period soaked in romanticism—a period that saw national freedom acquiring colours of mysticism with the nation being symbolised in the image of Mother Goddess. Such magical and supernatural attributes to components of personal experiences do not definitely belong to contemporary experience nor do they appeal to reason or contemporary sensibility in Tamil.

But then M.V.V. is M.V.V. He is not a person to care. Sometime towards the end of the fifties or the beginning of the sixties, he wrote two short novels, *Iruttu* (Darkness) and *Uyirin Yattirai* (The journey of the soul). In *Iruttu,* nightmares and hallucinations shatter the certitudes of a young couple's atheistic and rational convictions and to their stupefaction, even medical science fails to offer any convincing answers to their nightmarish visions in the twilight regions of consciousness—between sleep and wakefulness. At last one doctor diagnoses that to be the result of a malignant tumour in the brain, but once the tumour is surgically removed, the young wife dies. In the other work, *Uyirin Yattirai,* M.V.V. is concerned with rebirths and the conflicts in the emotional relationships and moral values when the principal characters come to know what their relationships were in their previous births.

M.V.V. assures us that these are not all products of his fevered imagination given a free reign. We have to believe him when he comes out with a work like *Kaadugal* (Ears), the work which has earned M.V.V. the Sahitya Akademi Award, 1993.

This novel is a fictionalized narrative of a phase from his personal life, when he suffered from a hearing disability. It was not deafness. Instead it was an assault on his ear drums of strange noises, a bewildering cacophony of sounds and also conversations, loud pitched declamations, threats which have a bearing on his daily life, real characters shouting at him what they would do. In the novel, these seem to interact, threaten and sometimes even entice him into acts forbidden. This results in the central character's sudden return to faith in God. He takes to reciting sacred books and verses in praise of Muruga. Disembodied voices console him, give him strength in moments of helplessness and lead him to remedial acts of worship of Muruga. All these are written not in a vein of frenzied outpouring but normally, like narrating what had passed by. These details, as so many others in the novel, are all drawn from M.V.V.'s own past life a phase known to all close to M.V.V. He himself has confessed to his

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atheistic beginnings in his youth and sudden conversion later to an abiding faith in Murugan and declared that it is this faith and devotion that has sustained him till this day, through all the hardships and turmoils in his life.

The psychedelic experiences, illusions, nightmarish visions, surrealistic phantasmagoria, the lived fears and anxieties of real life, the mental agony of a pathetic existence in abject poverty, the struggle to overcome the torturing physical disability, and the occasional solace that comes to him mercifully when he surrenders himself to his favourite deity, Murugan— all these coalesce and interact in the novel, each feeding on the other.

No questions can be raised about the authenticity of the experiences that M.V.V. has chosen to unfold by opening himself up in this novel. In fact, the fictionalisation is a very thin veneer that masks his real face and life. It could as well not be there. All these record a phase of his life, a dimension of his personality. It is as much a door open to the truth of life outside and a peep inwards into one's own self as Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception* or a random reading of *Ramakrishna Kathamrutham* by 'M'. The experiences are as real as any.

For a change M.V.V. is now receiving accolades wherever he goes. And he goes only if invited. In some quarters this novel is being acclaimed as a worthy addition to the Magical Realist school—they are the new converts to the current fad of Magical Realism in Tamil writing. This speaks of the universal acceptability that M.V.V. commands and enjoys and also of the kind of Magical Realist crop raised in Tamil soil in recent years.

AN EXCERPT

When he set his foot on the fourth step of the passage leading to the front gate of Vedanarayana Perumal temple, Mahalingam was stopped by an uneasy feeling creeping into him, questioning him: "There is so much dirt accumulated in me that I am not able to bear myself. Should I carry all that with me into the temple? Would I not be polluting temple's sanctity?" Hesitantly, he withdrew his raised foot back to the third step. He raised his head and saw the Lord seated deep inside, beyond the glow of lamps, hidden behind the dimness of the diffused lights. He appeared to be staring at him with an air of great concern and anxiety.

"The Lord seems to be worrying Himself that I might step into the temple. He has no reason to be so worried. Has He? Has he not

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posted these two fearsome sentries, what with the intimidating roll of their eye balls and protruding leonine teeth?" he said to himself, a bit amused. Even the flagpole in front seemed to have chosen to stand between him and the deity.

"There in the *garbhagriha* (Sanctum Sanctorum) the Lord is enjoying the warm company of the two *Devis*. In that state would He bother to notice who comes in and who goes out of the temple?" The moment he thought of *garbhagriha*, there flashed in his mind, the illustrations in the school text books of a womb with the fertilized human egg shown in the process of growing into a child, hanging, curled upside down carrying with it the stench of blood and bodily secretions. He felt sick and disgusted.

"I am not clean. I should not enter the temple, he said to himself and stepped further down now to the second step. Suddenly he felt he was not so sure of that either.

"One should be pure and clean physically and at heart—both from within and without, before entering a temple. Isn't that what they say? Right. Well, I have had my bath and have put on freshly washed clothes; if my mind is not pure, how could I be responsible for that? It is only for the purpose of purifying the mind and cleansing it of all dirt that we go to the temple. Don't I then have the right to go to the temple and pray for my daughter's life? Why shouldn't I then enter the temple?" Once again, he began climbing the steps.

"They call this temple 'Brahma's temple'! Brahma is of course the Lord of all creations. But that Brahma Himself is a creation of Lord Veda Narayana Perumal! The father has receded into oblivion in the glare of the son's glittering glory. There should not perhaps be too many temples and too much of rituals of worship for the creator. A temple dedicated to Lord Brahma is a rarity. Since there is one here for Brahma, perhaps the temple is named after him; a rarity is being celebrated."

"Is the act of creation itself disgusting and vulgar? I have within me created a world of obscenities and obscenities. Is not Brahma, the Lord of all creations, responsible for this creation too. Well, why not ask Brahma Himself?" resolving thus to himself, Mahalingam resumed climbing the steps. But he felt his feet being held back by someone's encircling arms and saying to him, 'Don't'. He could not free himself either to move ahead or to withdraw.

Like a blind man caught in a slush of mud standing waiting for someone to come along and extend a helping hand to free him, Mahalingam stood stunned and affixed on that third step. □

Translated from Tamil by Venkat Swaminathan

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BOOKS

[This new column is meant to feature recently published works of Indian Literature, originally written in English or translated into English from Indian languages. Publishers, writers and translators are requested to send copies of books to be featured in this column that obviously can accommodate only selected volumes. Readers may kindly send suggestions and notes on books they think are worthy of inclusion in this column. This time we are featuring only translations from Indian languages into English]

OXFORD ANTHOLOGY OF MODERN INDIAN POETRY: Ed. Vinay Dharwadker, A.K. Ramanujan; Pub. Oxford University Press, Delhi; pp. 266; Rs. 295.

This anthology brings together 125 poets from fifteen Indian languages including English, each represented by one poem. It covers many generations of writers from Tagore and Bharati to Anuradha Mahapatra and Sunanda Tripathy. Women poets have received special attention from the editors. Looked at from the point of view of representation the anthology's gaps are obvious; however this does not diminish its significance as a pioneering attempt to present an overview of modern Indian poetry revealing its coherent patterns and developments, through its eight thematic sections. The anthology is carefully edited, with a preface that defines its scope, an afterword on the contexts of modern Indian poetry by Vinay Dharwadker, textual notes on the poems, biographical notes on the contributors, a reading list and indexes to the poets, translators and languages featured. The book with its excellent translations is sure to turn the attention of readers and scholars from ancient to contemporary Indian poetry.

SCAVENGER'S SON: Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai; Tr. R.E. Asher; Pub. Heinemann, Oxford; pp. 118; £ 2.00 (India), $ 9.95 (U.S.), £ 4.99 (U.K.)

Scavenger's Son is a new translation of Thakazhi's famous Malayalam novel, *Thottiyude Makan* originally published in 1948.

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The translator, R.E. Asher, has earned recognition through his translations of the works of Vaikom Mohammed Basheer. The novel set in Kuttanad in central Kerala well-known for its rich paddy fields is deeply political and was considered radical at the time of its first publication, though it may have lost something of its revolutionary appeal today when the kind of scavenging described in the novel itself has been stopped in Kerala. The novel may best be read with some sense of historical perspective. The leading figures in the novel are outcastes, untouchables, who, denied of all class mobility were destined to be scavengers for several generations. In this sense, the novel like Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchables* and several works of Indian fiction in the first half of the century, foreshadow Dalit literature, though the writer himself is not a 'Dalit' in its caste-sense. This carefully translated novel brought out as part of Heinemann's 'Asian Writers Series' is a useful addition to Indian literature in translation.

THE PENGUIN NEW WRITING IN INDIA: Ed. Aditya Behl, David Nicholls; Pub. Penguin India, Delhi; pp. 246; Rs. 95.

Almost a reprint of the Indian literature special number of *Chicago Review* published in 1992, the anthology brings together a random selection of contemporary Indian writing in English and in translation from other Indian languages. The anthology in no way represents the contemporary literary scene in India either in terms of language or in terms of trends and movements, except in that it has featured a lot of women's poetry that has already appeared in Arlene Zide's anthology of Indian women's poetry, *In Their Own Voice*. Most of the writers in the anthology as also many of the pieces are not all that new either; some are already dead, and most are in their sixties. The editors do not seem to have any comprehensive idea of new Indian writing especially of its post-Modernist—in a strictly chronological sense—phase. In spite of all these, the anthology is sure to be welcomed in the vastly desolate landscape of Indian literature in translation and does provide a general idea about the diversity of Indian literature in the recent decades.

SURVIVAL : AN EXPERIENCE AND EXPERIMENT IN TRANSLATING MODERN HINDI POETRY : Ed. Daniel Weissbort, Girdhar Rathi; Pub. Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, pp. 126, Rs. 75; U.S. $10.

This anthology brings together ten distinct voices in contemporary Hindi poetry first translated into English by a group of experienced translators at a workshop organised by the Sahitya Akademi in 1990 and subsequently revised many times over the years. The poets are (the late) Raghuvir Sahay, Kunwar Narain, Kedarnath Singh, Vinod Kumar Shukla, Rituraj, Prayag Shukla, Girdhar Rathi, Mangalesh Dabral, Alok Dhanwa and Asad Zaidi and the translators include well-known names like Daniel Weissbort and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. Besides the eightyfour

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poems in translation the anthology has a brief preface by Daniel Weissbort, an insightful introduction by Girdhar Rathi, an interesting, if polemical, afterword by Harish Trivedi earnestly responded to by Daniel Weissbort and notes on the contributors. The polemics that supplement the volume raise some vital issues about translation and are as such of great interest to students of translation as is of course, the whole experiment.

BHASKARA PATTELAR AND OTHER STORIES : Paul Zacharia; Tr. A.J. Thomas, Gita Krishnakutty, Paul Zacharia; Pub. Affiliated East West Press Pvt. Ltd. Madras, pp. 224; Rs. 95.

This is a collection of twenty six stories—one of them almost a novelette—by Paul Zacharia, one of the most significant modern fiction writers in Malayalam translated competently by the author and two other translators. These stories written over a period of twenty-five years are quite representative of the author's *oeuvre*. The stories range from the teasingly funny to the pungently sarcastic, from the gently tender to the morbidly melancholic, from the calmly reflective to the aggressively violent. There are too moments of nostalgia and reverie, recollections of childhood, uninhibited expressions of sexuality, metaphysical broodings over sin and violence and deep contemplation over the ironies of man's residence on earth. These stories represent some of the highest peaks touched by Indian fiction today.

AGAINST MYSELF AND OTHER STORIES : Rajee Seth; Tr. Jasjit Purewal, Pub. Rupa & Co., New Delhi; pp. 82; Rs. 60.

This is a collection of eleven short stories competently translated from Hindi by Jasjit Purewal whose personal introduction captures the excitement of discovering and translating these stories by a writer who has been obsessed with "unveiling the invisible" which according to the author has "the most intense impact on our lives and holds the key to our lasting impressions of any incident." These are reflections of a woman writer destined to see her world through the isolated predicaments of her varied and often conflicting roles. They deal with the obscured frontiers of the female courtyards of life and reveal aspects of relationships, with a special sympathy for the lonely, the marginalised, the old and the handicapped.

CHANAKYA'S NEETI SCRIPTURE. Tr. R.K. Sharma, Pub. Bharatiya Vidyabhavan, Bombay; pp. 206, Rs. not stated.

This is a verse translation of Chanakya's *Nitisastra* that is supposed to date back to 300 B.C. It deals with the issues of ethics, wisdom and policy in individual, social and political life and is supposedly a companion volume to *Arthasastra* that deals with statecraft and matches well with the *Kural* in Tamil. This is a bilingual text with the original verses, their English transcript and simple literal translations into English in quartrains with a useful glossary and index.

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JOURNALS

THE DOWNTRODDEN INDIA Vol. 1. No. 1. Ed. Kashinath Ranveer, Dept. of English, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad. Single Copy Rs. 50/-, Annual Rs. 150/-

The inaugural number of the journal dedicated to Dalit and Bahujan studies carries five perceptive articles related to Dalit life and literature by renowned scholars and academics like Gail Omvedt, Susie Tharu, and Lancy Lobo. Of particular interest to lovers of literature are the articles on the politics of Dalit poetry by E.V. Ramakrishnan and on the Dalit women poets by Eleanor Zelliot. The journal also has a section devoted to book reviews.

THE JOURNAL OF INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH, Vol. 22, No. 2. Ed. G.S. Balarama Gupta, Dept. of English, Gulbarga University, Gulbarga 585106. Single Copy Rs. 50/-, Annual Rs. 100/-

This journal, in the 22nd year of its publication, publishes creative writing in English by Indians and critical articles on Indian writing in English by Indians as well as foreign critics. This issue has interesting articles by Srinivas Rayaprol, Jayanta Mahapatra, Madhusudhana Reddy and K.R. Rao besides poems and a short story. The articles are on aspects of Rushdie, Malgonkar and Wiliam Carlos Williams. There are also 16 book reviews.

INDIAN PANORAMA Vol 1 No. 1 Ed. Rangrao Bhongle, E/1, Academic Staff Quarters, Vidyanagari, Kalina, Santa Cruz (E), Bombay 400 098. Single Copy Rs. 25/-

This inaugural number has an interview with Gieve Patel, articles by N.G. Meshram, Sarla Palkar, Bhalchandra Nemade and Rangrao Bhongle, a short story by Priya Tendulkar and poems by among others, Waman Nimbalkar, Keshav Meshram, G.V. Kulkarni, Kusumagraj, Balraj Komal and Vishnu Narayanan Namboodiri besides book reviews. Bhalchandra Nemade's highly critical article on Indian Writing in English is worth a serious debate.

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WORLD LITERATURE TODAY Vol. 68, No. 2. Ed. Djelal Kadir, 110, Monnet Hall, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Ok, 73069; Single copy $ 9.00 + postage $ 3.00.

This is a special issue devoted to 'Indian Literature in the fifth Decade of Independence', introduced by Vinay Dharwadker through an insightful survey. The issue features poems by Amrita Pritam, Panna Naik, Nabaneeta Debsen, Shanmugha Subbiah, Gnanakoothan, Meena Alexander, A.K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar, Narayan Surve, Dilip Chitre, Kunwar Narain, Shrikant Varma and Kedarnath Singh among others, a short story by Mohsin Khan and articles on Indian poetry and fiction. The issue is not in any sense representative of current Indian writing as it has creative pieces only from seven languages and the selections are quite arbitrary. However the issue gives the reader an opportunity to contemplate over Indian writing today as also its representations abroad. The articles by Vilas Sarang, R. Parthasarathy, Jayanta Mahapatra, John Oliver Perry, Makarand Paranjape, C.M. Naim, R.K. Gupta and Vinay Dharwadker do cover some ground.

THE BOOK REVIEW Vol. 18, No. 12. Ed. Chandra Chari, P.O. Box 5247, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi 110 021, Single Copy Rs. 12/-, Annual Rs. 220/-.

The Book Review is a serious review journal that has recently launched a series of special issues focussing on Indian literatures. It has already brought out useful issues on Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Urdu, Gujarati and Hindi. This issue focusses on Bengali writing today and the contributors include Sankha Ghosh, Nabaneeta Debsen, Sujit Mukherjee, Hiranmay Karlekar, Indra Nath Choudhuri, Arun Mitra, Sumanta Banerjee, Meenakshi Mukherjee and Alok Ranjan Das Gupta among others. Besides this extremely useful survey of Bengali writing today, the issue has also a general section that reviews important books from various disciplines, and the informative regular columns, 'Books in Brief' and 'Book News.'

IJDL (International Journal of Dravidian Linguistics) Vol. 23, No. 1. Ed. A.P. Andrews Kutty, Dravidian Linguistics Association, Kerala Panini Buildings, St. Xaviers College, P.O. Trivandrum 695 086. Annual Sub. Rs. 200/-

This is an extremely useful journal of linguistics that carries scholarly articles on grammar, epigraphy, tagmemics, etymology, philology, tribal linguistics, dialect studies and linguistic politics. Though devoted chiefly to Dravidian linguistics, the issue also carries articles on the structures of other languages like Assamese and Bengali besides discussions on language policy and language and nationality.

□

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Anantha Murthy, U.R. (b. 1932) : Kannada novelist, short story writer, playwright, poet and critic; author of more than twenty books including *Samskara* and *Bhava*; won Karnataka Sahitya Akademi award, Karnataka Government award, Masti award and Jnanpith award in 1994; presently President, Sahitya Akademi.

Ashapurna Devi (b. 1909) : Bengali novelist and short story writer, with 161 novels, 26 short story collections and 37 books for children; recipient of Jnanpith Award, 1976 for her novel, *Prathama Pratishruti*, Padma Shree in 1976, and Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 1994. **Add :** 18-Kanungo Park, Raja S.C. Mulick Road, Garia, Calcutta 700 194.

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Deed, Jaswant (b. 1954) : Modern Punjabi poet with two collections of poems; recipient of Bhai Vir Singh Poetry award; presently working as programme executive with Doordarshan. **Add :** 489-Urban Estate, Phase-I, Jalandhar.

Deotale, Chandrakant (b. 1936): Well-known Hindi poet; recipient of Sahitya Shikhar Samman, Madhya Pradesh 1986-87. **Add :** G-6, Shasakiya Awash, Madhav Nagar, Ujjain (M.P.)

Deshpande, G.P. (b. 1938). Marathi playwright and critic; *Udhwasta Dharmasala, Chanakya, Andheryatra* and *Satyashodhak* are his major plays; Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University. **Add :** 115 J.N.U. Campus, J.N.U., New Delhi 110 067.

Gangopadhyay, Shyamal (b. 1933) : Bengali fiction writer; his published works include more than ten collections of short stories and sixty novels; recipient of Motilal, Tarasankar, Bibhutibhushan, Katha, Siromani and Bhualka puraskars besides Sahitya Akademi award. **Add :** Brahmapur Mete Masjid, Bansdroni, Calcutta 700 070.

Gul Chauhan (b. 1950) : Modern Punjabi poet and fiction writer; with a novel and four collections of short stories. **Add :** 3088/11, Sec. 44-D, Chandigarh.

Kambar, Chandrasekhar (b. 1937) : Kannada poet, playwright and folklorist; with eighteen plays, six collections of poems, three novels and ten research books on folklore; recipient of Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya Award of Natya Sangha, Ashan Award, Sangeet Natak Academy Award, Sahitya Akademi Award for *Sirisampige* in 1991; presently Vice Chancellor, Kannada University. **Add :** 136, Kengeri Upanagar, Bangalore 560 060.

Mahapatra, Sitakanta (b. 1937) : Oriya poet, essayist, translator and civil servant; published over thirty books; won Sahitya Akademi Award for his *Sabdara Akash,* 1974, Jnanpith award in 1992; poems translated into several Indian and foreign languages. **Add :** Secretary, Dept. of Culture, Ministry of H.R.D., New Delhi.

Majumdar, Amiya Bhushan (b. 1918) : Bengali fiction writer; his major publications include three novels : *Bibikta Rajnagar, Gar Srikhanda, Mahish Kurar Upakatha* and a collection of short stories *Sreshtha Galpa;* recipient of Bankim Puraskar of the Govt. of West Bengal in 1986 and Sahitya Akademi award for his

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novel *Raj Nagar* in 1986. **Add :** Municipality Market, Cochbehar, West Bengal.

Minder (b. 1943) : An *avant garde* writer of Punjabi, much translated in Indian and foreign languages. **Add :** S.G.T.B. Khalsa College, Anandpur Sahib, Punjab.

Mirchandani, Tara (b. 1930) : Sindhi fiction writer and dramatist; her published works include four novels and four collections of short stories. Her novels like *Usha, Lahruniji Goonj* and *Hathayogi* have already become classics in Sindhi. Her short stories have also enjoyed a very wide readership; recipient of Sahitya Sabha Sahyog Foundation award (1992), Nai Duniya Publications, Central Hindi Directorate and Sahitya Akademi award in 1993. **Add :** A-1, Jack and Jill Apartments, Narangi Baugh Road, Pune 411 001.

Mitra, Amar (b. 1951) : Bengali fiction writer; his published works include seven novels and four collections of short stories; recipient of Samaresh Basu Akademi award 1991, Samatat Kamala Ghosh award for the best short story published in 1990. **Add :** 27/B, Indra Biswas Road, Calcutta 700 037.

Mukherjee, Asim Kumar : Translates from Bengali into English; teaches English at R.K. College. **Add :** Head of the Dept. of English, R.K. College, Madhubani, Bihar.

Mukhopadhyay, Subrata (b. 1950) : Bengali fiction writer; his published works include six novels and two collections of short stories; recipient of Samaresh Basu Award (1989); presently working as BDO, Govt. of West Bengal. **Add :** Chaudhuripara Holisahar North 24 Parganas W.B.

Nandy, Pritish (b. 1947) : Writer, photographer, designer and editor, has published over 40 books of poetry, photography, drama and translations including *Lonesong Street, The Nowhere Man, A Stranger Called, Pritish Nandy 30;* recipient of Padma Shri, Bhabha Fellowship. **Add :** Tulsiani Chambers, 212, Nariman Point, Bombay 400 001.

Nilim Kumar (b. 1962) : Five collections of poetry; has been translating into several languages; is physician by profession. **Add :** C/o Manas Kumar Sarma, Industrial Co-op. Bank, Maligaon, Guwahati-781011.

Offredi, Mariola : Critic in English, has translated Premchand's *Godan* into Italian; Presently Professor of Hindi at University of Venice.

Patil, Chandrakant (b. 1944): Well-known Marathi poet, critic; translates from Marathi into Hindi and vice versa; recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize 1991 for his translation of *Tamas.* **Add :** Dept. of Botany, S.B. College of Science, Saraswatinagar, Aurangabad 431 001.

Rajadhyaksha, Vijaya (b. 1933): Distinguished Marathi short story writer, scholar and critic; has sixteen collections of short stories, three books of essays and five books of criticism to her credit in addition to a large number of books edited by her; recipient of State government awards

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and Sahitya Akademi award for her literary criticism; presently she is Professor Emeritus at S.N.D.T. University. **Add :** 2, Abhang, Sahitya Sahawas, Bandra (E), Bombay 400 051.

Rajinder Kaur (b. 1940) : Punjabi poet with one collection of poems; presently teaching in a school. **Add :** 2339/38-C, Chandigarh, Punjab.

Rath, Ramakanta (b. 1934) : Well-known Oriya poet with six collections; winner of Sahitya Akademi award, 1978, Sarala award, 1984, Saraswati and Kabir Sammans in 1994; presently Vice-President, Sahitya Akademi.

Ray, Sibnarayan (b. 1921) : Writer and critic with three publications; presently Research Director of Indian Renaissance Institute. **Add :** AF 533, Salt Lake, Sect. 1, Calcutta 700064

Roy Barman, Bhaskar : Bengali and English poet, short story writer and translator; his works have been published in magazines in India and abroad. **Add :** C/o Lt. Harendra Kishore Roy Barman, South Bank of Girls, Bodhjung Dighi, Itakhola Road, Banamalipur, Agartala-799 001, West Tripura.

Sanyal, Ashis (b. 1938) : Bengali novelist, dramatist, critic and poet; his works include *Patabhumi Kampaman Jete* (poetry), *Bhorer Bristi* (novel), *Aj Basanta* (verse-drama) etc. **Add :** 53, Bidhan Pally, Jadavpur, Calcutta 700 032.

Sethi, Suresh : Indo-English poet. **Add :** 10/14, West Patel Nagar, New Delhi 110 008.

Shetty, Manu : Regularly translates from Kannada into English; has worked with the Committee on Social Thought, University of Chicago; has also collaborated with A.K. Ramanujan in translating works in Kannada. **Add :** Department of Philosophy, University of Mysore.

Sugata, S. (b. 1971) : Kannada and English poet and translator; her published works include poems and articles. **Add :** No. 37 (Upstairs), 14 Cross, II main, Lakkasandra Extn., Wilson Garden, Bangalore 560 030.

Swaminathan, Venkat (b. 1933) : Writer and critic in Tamil and English with six published volumes, besides numerous articles. **Add :** 243, Vidya Vihar, West Enclave, Pitampura, Outer Ring Road, Delhi 110 034.

Vaid, Krishna Baldev (b. 1927) : Well-known Hindi novelist, short story writer, has 16 published works to his credit, widely translated. **Add :** 1652-B-1, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi 110 030.

Vajpeyi, Ashok (b. 1941) : Hindi Poet, critic and civil servant; 12 published volumes; has won Dayawati Modi Kavi Shikhar Samman and Sahitya Akademi award. Has edited several literary journals and anthologies; presently Jt. Secy Dept. of Culture, Min. of HRD; **Add :** C-II/43, Shahjahan Road, New Delhi 110 011.

Venkatram, M.V. (b. 1920) : A prolific Tamil fiction writer, essayist, biographer and translator; he brought out seven significant novels, an equal number of collections of

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short stories, one collection of novellas, another of essays, fifty short biographies especially of the builders of modern India and translations from English and Hindi; recipient of Sahitya Akademi award 1993. Add: 37, Thoppu Street, Kumbakonam 612 001.

Note: Manjul Bhagat has informed us that the excerpt from her novel, *Khatul* published in *IL* No. 164 was translated by Jai Ratan. Sukrita Paul Kumar's 'Prayers' in the same issue consists of three short poems, the first ending with 'temples' and the second with 'soul'. Her 'Poems' consists of two different pieces, the first ending with 'their folds'—Ed.



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'I can go, But why should I?' : Remembering Shaktida

This is how poets die: they keep awake all their life disturbed by nightmares; go on taking new incarnations losing and gaining admirers at every turn; live intensely, love and quarrel intensely,—and then, one day leaving the readers wondering as to what their next miracle would be, they just vanish leaving behind their unfinished manuscripts and unfulfilled projects, just walk into death as casually as walking into another room in the house.

Shakti Chattopadhyay's unannounced departure on Twenty-third March must have come as a rude shock to all who knew him and wanted him to go on surprising them with ever newer visions of the world and ever subtler uses of the word. I vividly recall that warm evening in the surrealistic setting of a palace-turned-hotel in Bhopal where we had first met in the distinguished company of Dilip Chitre, Ashok Vajpeyi, Kedarnath Singh, Vinod Kumar Shukla, Arvind Mehrotra and the young poet Rajendra Dhodapkar: one of those creative encounters made possible by Bharat Bhavan that at that time was engaged in a relentless battle against mediocrity in art and literature. We stayed together for less than a month while our poems were being translated into Hindi and Vinod's into English. After the day's work we would relax in the evenings and Shaktida literally in 'high spirits'

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would relate the tales of his adventurous youth and also turn his poorer equals green with envy by declaring the fee his poetry would fetch him through the sales of his books and his readings: those marvellous pieces of poetic theatre so popular in Bengal and Bangladesh. Of course we had all heard of his fight against the Tagore school of poetry, his understandable preference for Jibanananda Das as a poet, the inspiration he had received from Budhadev Basu and Allen Ginsberg, his historic meeting with his illustrious contemporary, Sunil Gangopadhyay and their founding of the *Krittibas* group and the *Krittibas* magazine that pioneered the poetry of the future through their unorthodox articulations of a post/anti-Tagorean sensibility. We had also read a lot of his work in the original or in translation and even translated some into our languages: they had that inbuilt quality of translatability in them so that they seemed to invite us to create them anew in our own tongues.

I specifically remember the morning when he asked me 'What would you have for breakfast?' to which I replied, 'No, not cornflakes certainly.' He then laughed aloud, for it could easily have been the abrupt beginning of one of his poems well-known for their intriguing drama as well as their quaint humour. Remember those famous first lines: 'Who's there: Aye, Who? May be my younger—the blossoms of the flower-tree', 'The ear of poetry listens to latent alphabets soaked in water' 'Very close to heart was lying the kerchief aflame', 'I am calling from hell, do you hear me?', Do birds and beasts weep as man weeps?', 'Ocean, your carnivorous odour rises with the wind today', 'I must escape from perspective', 'There is no preordained time to enter the forest, you can enter it any time,' 'You are there in religion, you are there in giraffe' 'The diseased cat is sitting very close to happiness' ...

After that exciting initiation I have had several opportunities to be with Shaktida, to talk and listen to him, during festivals of poetry in Bhopal, in Delhi and finally in Calcutta and Shantiniketan where I had gone on his invitation to join a band of poets and poetry-lovers who were being encouraged by him to develop the art of public recitation. Every time I found him as warm and exciting as his well-chiselled poems. No wonder the younger poets of Bengal found in him their affectionate god-father.

Shakti Chattopadhyay's growth as a poet is obvious to anyone who compares the poems of his early youth with those of his maturer years. The neo-romantic lyricism of the earlier poems gives way in his later work to a more condensed and more

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dramatic form; his native humour remains, yet his poems begin to ripen around heavier themes like sadness, old age and death; the verbal magic gets reinforced by a philosophical and detached vision of life. "Snow has spread over the best parts of my body," he observes in one of his poems written twelve years ago ('The best part of My Body'). A day follows another like the poet placing his palm on a tree, on the leaves and flowers, 'like on the hair of a girl, on her ribbons and hairpins in his younger days.' ('A Day Follows Another'). The image of the cat appears again and again in his later poems. At times it seems to symbolise the ominous presence of death as in the poem 'On My Birthday' where a cat counting its 'fiftytwo paws' spirals up the 'black iron stairs' in the midst of the birth-day merrymaking. Again we find a sick and unhappy cat sitting close to happiness expecting posterity. Still there is a note of hope that survives the sadness: "When one oven dies out, you must light up another." ('When One Oven Dies Out'). There is too an assertion of his faith in man: "Only man can purge the air of pollution and extend life beyond life. Only man can restore harmony in the outerworld by rinsing off the venom within." ('Only Man Can').

As I repeat these lines I feel his loving hand on my shoulder and a whisper in my ears: "I can go; but why should I?"

About This Issue

In the last two years *Indian Literature* brought out a number of special issues with their focus on Women's Writing, Young Poetry, The State of Criticism in India, Progressive Literature in Retrospect, Gujarati Dalit Literature, A.K. Ramanujan and The Art of Translation, Hindi Short Story Today, Hindi Poetry Today, Malayalam Short Story, Malayalam Poetry, Tamil Writing Today, Emerging Voices in Indian Poetry in English and Bengali Short Fiction. These issues were meant to introduce even if sketchily, the current trends in various languages as well as the diverse movements that are making their mark in the Indian literary scene today. This issue devoted to Telugu Writing Today is the latest in the series.

It is evidently impossible to do justice to a literature in about 200 pages of translations and surveys. What is being attempted here is no more than the presentation of a few specimens of contemporary creative sensibility in Telugu. Translations always run the risk of loss and distortion; this is especially true of Telugu

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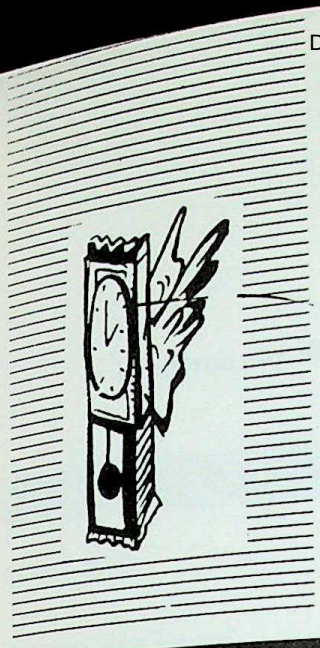
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fiction that is chiefly rustic in inspiration and colloquial in idiom. Our multi-lingual society however has little choice in the matter since English is still our major literary link language within the country and our language of literary exchange with the world outside whatever be its cultural-political implications in our post/neo-colonial situation.

One thing that strikes any reader of the mainstream Telugu fiction today is that it is almost untouched by the complex range of existential dilemmas, moral predicaments and metaphysical enquiries that characterise much of modern Indian fiction, say like those we come across in a U.R. Anantha Murthy, an O.V. Vijayan or a Nirmal Verma. If most of these stories appear to have been sculpted in the Progressive-Realist mould of the Forties and the Fifties the reasons for this fixation may have to be sought either in a strong commitment to the naturalist narrative mode that the writers think is best suited to an exploration of themes related to the life of marginalised social segments or to a lack of exposure to modern trends in Indian and foreign languages including the new models of socialist writing (from Brecht to Ben Okri and Marquez), a refusal to experiment, an indifference to questions of form, an overt espousal of the 'progressive' ideology that is grasped simplistically as a portrayal of outer life and loyalty to conventional forms and a subconscious resistance to the deeper questions of life. Too much reliance on 'Movement literature'—and Telugu seems to have been prone to movements from time to time—in spite of the great collective energy the movements release and the opening-up of new areas of experience, can also have a negative impact on individual imagination and linguistic inventiveness, both in fiction and poetry. We have tried our best to make the issue as authentic as possible though we have not been able to accommodate even one-fifth of the materials that we had gathered during the course of an year. One positive feature of the Telugu scene today is the visible presence of the assertive female voice both in poetry and in fiction, an area where Telugu equals and at times excels other Indian languages. We are grateful to Ranga Rao and Amarendra Dasari who have been particularly helpful in organising material and to the writers and translators whose response has been literally overwhelming.

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POETRY

C. Narayana Reddy

MOBILITY

When duty-bound Vikramarkas
move along carrying corpses of travails
soil kisses their feet with lips of grass.

Mobility is life.
It is the starting point of the ocean's heart.
The child born in the East prison
starts his journey with a thousand legs.
Prescriptions imposed by authority
will not imprison dynamic mobility.
It sweeps forth riding on
the crest of tornados.

In a suffocating country
agitation is movement.

JUST LIKE THAT BIRD

I see it regularly
extending its wings like two hands.
That bird exercises vigorously
climbing over the stool.

Suddenly like an arrow it shoots into the sky
and settles on the wind-platform
in the posture of a meditating yogi.

I became a child
looking at its incredible feats.

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I gather myself
for a repeat of the feats in the air.

As suddenly, I realise
I am a human who has not learnt even to walk on earth. □

Translated by K. Damodar Rao

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Ajanta

SLUMBER

No one is around.
The schoolboy has closed his book,
the streetsinger has stopped his song,
Everyone is at home.

The death-dealers have set aside their weapons,
the devils have reached the gates of the lower world,
the rulers have washed clean their bloody hands.
All is calm.

They look into the mirrors,
and realise what there is in the chasm.
They close their doors before death yawns.

Workers dry their tears in the moonlight before their huts,
prisoners fly in the spaces between prison-bars
and beggars sleep on the pavements,
wrapping themselves in wall-posters.
No one is around.

The streetwalkers have cast off their poisonous garments,
and hung their tear-drenched breasts on the walls.
Everyone is asleep,
hiding their life-remnants in the cellar.

Daredevils, politicians, rulers,
commoners and the gentle—all are asleep.
Everyone is in the refuge of darkness.

Now no flags fly, no clocks tick,
no laws function,
everyone is in the lap of darkness.
All differences are erased:
between the killer and the killed, the beauty and the beast.
There are no thorny fences between man and man,

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no one now is afraid of death.
Everyone is in the grip of sleep.

This is the moment when the serpent of time
casts off its slough,
this is the moment when unseen worlds take birth
beyond the limits of time.
No jackals of thought prowl after anyone this night,
life's tiger doesn't frighten anyone,
for all are in the lap of sleep.
The roar of the cannon will be heard only tomorrow,
the strident music of war won't be heard just now.
Man cannot box in darkness.

There will be the fear of the postman
only in the morning,
as the letter posted by the killers
reaches only in the morning.
No mother is perturbed by the sons
who have abandoned her,
even a friend's betrayal
would not be known just now.

Hopes, disappointments and sighs
hatred, jealousy and brashness—
nothing hurts. There's silence everywhere,
and only the throbbing of a single heart.

THE CURVED LINE

One token is enough,
a tremor on the curved line is enough,
a moment's horror is enough in dream-forests,
the fragment of a cloud is enough
on silent lips;
the rest is chaos.

When unseen eyes rain fire,
you can manifest before yourself
in a thousand shapes
on the altar of ashes.

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You can metamorphose into a fiend.

When remembrances
that frightened empty oceans chase you,
you cannot hear anything
except the death-rattle
of a wounded man, wrapped in clouds of dust.

Friend, I am guilty,
I have committed sacrilege on myself
in the cacophony, when my head broke into pieces
on the throne of silence.
I have myself put into others' hands
the reflection of myself safely hidden
in the magical mirror.

Friend, I am a sinner,
I have tortured with night's sharp nails
the pretty letters that bloomed in the secret gardens
behind invisible fences.
I have myself burnt to ashes in the devilish city
the sunlight treasured in my palms.

I am guilty, friend,
for I am the cause of the horrible devildance
at moonrise.

Punishment is certain.
Will the trace of blood be erased
on the path of memory?
Will the mad percussions of *mridanga* cease
in the meadows of anxiety?
It is horrible—my madness.

Punishment is certain.
Under this enchanting tree,
I am burning
in the blaze of sorrow
my hands that have turned into snakes.
My words won't be seen
in the charmed mirror.

Friend, tell me

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about Death's secret of life.

One token is enough,
one tremor is enough on the curved line,
a moment's horror is enough
in dream forests—
the rest is chaos.

□

Translated by D. Kesava Rao

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Ismail

HER EYES IN SLEEP

Midnight. Suddenly
a sound rears its hood
in the distance,
and, disturbed in her sleep,
she turns over
and hugs me.

Her eyes are pebbles,
singing
under the running
stream of sleep.

Bewitched by the sound
of sparkling waters,
weird animals of the dark
lurk on the banks
of her sleep.

THE SUNFISH

The moonworm wriggles through
the dark flesh of the pondfruit;
wriggles through my thoughts.

Deep down knifeeyes swim
making and closing furrowless wounds;
screws of squiggling shadow
draw out terror.

Oh, the sunfish—
will the sunfish tear the starnet
Will the sunfish dart to the lake
and gulp the moonworm?

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SCENTS OF THE EVENING

For me she wears
every evening
the sunset fragrances;

the light perfume
of lengthening shadows
below her cheeks and ears;
the smell
of the cascading rain
in the seaside casuarina grove
in her hair.

Her body has the scent
of the dens
the Sun-lion sleeps in
in the nights;
her eyes have the blue fragrance
of the sky, gradually
filling with stars.

A dark flight of crows
sets in the tamarind tree :
and from the same tree
the moon flutters
her white wing. □

Translated by D. Kesava Rao

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Nagnamuni

TO THE FIGHTER

Although I know the pleasures of giving,
and although I am a habitual giver,
I have nothing to give you today.
I am a predecessor even to Karna
in giving charity.

I am the blossoming morning flower of friendship
that is unjustly robbed.
I walk without caution
among the city vipers that feign friendship.

Stay, though I have nothing to give you.
Don't throw off your hope
nor remove the helmet of courage.
You seem to have crossed many books,
learnt many subtle ideas about duty,
and gathered saws, maxims and aphorisms.
You seem to have fallen and bled
among the cacti of dual values
in this ancient holy land.
My words will refresh you.
I shall also peel off my armour
and give it to you
to serve you as a weapon.

I shall gather tears from the villagers
and sow them in the hilly slopes of sorrow.
I shall give you swords
that grow in the fields like corncobs.
Use them as unseen forces
in the battle against common people.
Remember, time obeys the man
who holds the sword :

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the sword may be an idea, an attitude
or a new insight.
Future is the daring to fight the past.

I shall wander among cities
and pick up the pavement-skeletons
that nations and laws have feasted on,
and make a backbone of them for you
to fight on. Whom to fight with and where
is hidden in a secret code.
Who the friend is and who the foe,
who the thief and who the honest man
is difficult to find out,
all of them hide under law.

In this everlasting midnight
where diabolic moneypower rules,
whom should we fight with?

My words are your guiding light,
take them, they are invincible weapons :
attack the forces
that turn this country into a slaughterhouse
and every child into a faceless being.

MY WORDS

My words
don't canter like decorated steeds
nor amuse like the tricks of a clown.
They don't roll
like stones pushed downhill,
nor thrill people with echoes
of ideas like illusion or monism.
They don't drive you away
from the world of reality.

My words don't force people to offer their heads
on the sacrificial altar
to the accompaniment of *mantras*
to exorcise evil spirits;

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they are not ravings
That have no relation
between word and deed.
They don't ring
in stony devotion
like temple bells;
they are alarms
to warn you of life's hazards,
like the bells of a fire-engine.

My words are not picked
from the musty pages
of antiquated texts :
they are grabbed
from the tongues of living beings

I adore the volcanoes,
I wake up the earthquakes,
I aim the weapons of my words
at mad governments,
insane theories
and imbecik social inequalities.
My words are atomic weapons,
people are my atomic weapons. □

Translated by D. Kesava Rao

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K. Siva Reddy

THE DEAD

Remembering the dead is a duty :
they live in our troubles and responsibilities.
We are indebted to them for this land, people,
for their aspirations and hopes
and for bearing the cross of self-sacrifice.
They were great, mad, brave
and unsparing on themselves :
it is difficult to repay their debt directly.
Their achievements, as all others are,
are only partial; and the dead
show us the path with bloodstained footsteps.
They walked along during thorny nights
with wounded hearts. They went by,
shedding precious word-tears like the first showers,
to see the dawn of the first spring.
To remember them is not only a duty :
it is a *yajna,* the waging of an endless war.

DESIRE

Everyday someone lifts her into the bus,
and someone perhaps sets her down at the office.
Her legs atrophied in childhood perhaps with polio.
I observe her everyday.

From her I learn how the mind rules the body.
She seems capable of lifting the earth,
though she has no legs.
Her face reflects trouble, fatigue,
but there is no trace of shyness, suspicion or despair,
not even fear or sorrow.
There's only a desire to take her life into her hands.

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Some people feel depressed every moment,
some die every moment,
some make their lives vile, mean and abject,
some weep from every pore of their bodies.
She perhaps smiles at them in scorn and in pity.

How many slogans of war should we write
on the faces of the chickenhearted around us?
Probably victory results
from a will to live
and from a determination to make life a struggle.
Only the kindhearted
can use a sword.
One who has a living desire in him
rolls like a wave, though he has no limbs.
He becomes deathless in the warbling
of a song-bird.

I see her everyday
and learn courage from her.
Some ask: Why live?
Because there's nothing greater than living.
Why live with so many problems?
Because there's no prettier garden than life.

A girl climbs the staff to the drumbeat
and stands on it on one leg,
she rides a bicycle on a taut wire;
another climbs a ladder and jumps into a blazing fire,
a third ties a rope to two peaks
and moves from one side to the other.
I see her in all these instances,
the power of her will to live blossoms like a flower.

WITNESS

This night should burn away before my very eyes.
Like gathering pearls from ocean-depths,
poems should be gathered from the depths of night;
We should breathe some of our life into them
to give life to them. As our life slowly ebbs,

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the life of the poems grows, precious gems
form from seething, from simmering inside oneself.
Unless we burn white in the forge of self,
poems do not acquire the shape and soul we intend.
I kill a part of myself everyday :
my words, fed on my blood, grow before me;
the essence of my soul
lives in their many facets, many shapes. □

Translated by D. Kesava Rao.

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A. Jayaprabha

SILENCE



Silence
may be melodious
in a song,
but often
it is like a desert.

Sorrow
is perhaps
a silent sandstorm,

The face of silence,
like that of a cow's
is often pitiful.
A word
that cannot be uttered
nests in silence :
Probably silence is beautiful,
but many times
it is a pathless jungle,
or a wide chasm,
with the other bank invisible.

Many nights
are silent,
like the sky
covered in darkness.
Life is petrified
when the clock doesn't strike.
If silence is the obverse,
the reverse is indifference,
and bearing this indifference
is difficult.

Silence may bloom

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with a thousand petals
or boom like a cannon;
but it shouldn't be
like a cracked leaf of autumn,
or like a blighted flower
on the *sati's* funeral pyre,
or like the slicing melody
of sorrow.

LONELINESS

Sailing the seas
in search of shadows,
alone and without rest :
Yet the sail isn't lowered,
nor is there any slackening of effort.

Searching as far as
the eye can see—alone :
the net is cast,
but it's her mind that gets caught.

This ache of void,
this insufferable silence
bites the hook
again and again.
As the line is pulled out of water,
it turns into a query.

A teardrop in the eyes
becomes a sea in the nights;
each remembrance
is washed ashore
by successive waves.
Life surges ahead
like the waves of the sea
in which she, like a boat, sails.

She is the ebb and tide,
she is the voyage—
for ever and ever,
alone.

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THE GIRL

In a world
warming itself
in passionate kisses
and wineglasses,
she was sleeping
among the washing machines,
on the cold floor,
drawing herself in,
trying to overcome the cold.
Friendless, homeless,
not even having a coat
to wrap around herself,
she came there in search of heat,
but was getting frozen.

When we went into the basement
to wash our clothes,
she felt ashamed
for being in our way,
that homeless girl.
She didn't know perhaps
who her kith and kin were,
perhaps she had no money,
or she was betrayed,
or she had become a drug addict,
She wanted to hide herself
from the humankind among the cold machines.
When she was sleeping
like a drooping leaf,
we returned guiltily
without disturbing her sleep and silence.
But her frightened and sad face
pricked us like a thorn
throughout the day
in that far-away country. □

Translated by D. Kesava Rao

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Devipriya

MARINA BEACH

Night.
Ships sway in the harbour
in the distance.
It is as if the sea is
alive and ablaze.

The rafts
shoot through the darkness
and ski on the waves.
Small cars
slide, without glancing
at Kannagi,
teaching lessons of history
with a raised hand.
The lonely lighthouse
stands like a cyclops.
Saravanan, the conch seller,
shows me a cowrie shell
he picked on the beach
and tells me that it is
from the shores of Africa.
Light-scented breezes surprise us
amidst strong winds.
Sands shift under the feet
like moving seconds.
In the moonlight
the sea looks like a silken
garment
dangling on the feet
of the Madras girl

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TOIL

The lifted crowbar
glints in the sun.
Sweat from the mirror-like brow
falls on the clods of earth
like drops of gold.
A sparrow's nest
hanging from the Babul tree
moves to and fro
like the food-bundle
brought from home.
In the pond
carp glitter
like silver coins.
The coolie's body
becomes a shehnai
in the sunlight
and plays the music of labour.

Fatigue sweeps over
in waves.
As he knows the *raga* of toil,
the sun greets him.
Raising the dust of dusk
the music turns homeward. □

Translated by D. Kesava Rao

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Mandarapu Hymavathy

SERPENTINE EMBRACE

Everything is fine
until then
be it with lust
or passion
the two bodies entwined in oneness
in the blessed moments of
oblivion
you release
an arrow from your bow
"When is the salary?"

Even a pros wouldn't
think of such a thing at that moment
even a beast won't
behave otherwise
All of a sudden
a thousand monstrous lizards
Creeping on my body
In that frightful moment of the mind
I feel like flinging you away
far afar from my life
Yet as a 'Bharatiya Nari'
in my live tomb of tradition
I fight for breath
bogged in the mire of marriage
it isn't in my hands to get away even a wee bit
from your body let alone from life
I exist unto death
recompensing every second
in your serpentine embrace.

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BLUE POEMS

A Woman
doesn't remind you of
the heroic bold fearless face of
Rudrama Devi
A woman doesn't remind you of
Madam Curie synonym for science
A woman doesn't remind you of
Rani Lakshmi Bai fighting the British for self respect
A woman doesn't remind you of
Gargi and Maitreyi's discourses with the scholars
A woman is a mere sparkling star in the skies of your heart
half naked beautiful statue!

Even when the world
travelled into atomic weapons
for the woman it travels back to
the primitive ages.
A woman is a symbol of sex
a signal of sensuality
poet or painter
he etches my body in beautiful description
my body the capital for
the silver screen or ad world

For you another name for the woman
is body
you'll never peep into my mind
of inner conflicts
you'll never understand
My pen writes the reality
When my mind is on fire
when my heart is struck violently

If realities are blue poems
We write only blue poetry
Realities are our poetic themes! □

Translated by 'MO'

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Patibandla Rajani

A STATEMENT ON ABORTION

Kanha,
Why did you, like a fearless trespasser,
form the other half
of the group of cells I allowed
unwillingly, rashly,
around that fourteenth day?

Because I hadn't enough blood
to share with you,
and had no time to bring you up,
because your sister couldn't even crawl,
I did not want to have you.
Your sin was to come into being
without permission,
and my temporary job and health
sentenced you to death.
Agonised and vacillating,
I got onto the table feeling like a hangman :
gloved hands covered your face,
I left you to their mercy,
as Abhimanyu was to the arrows.
When I lost you, I wept
like the helpless Pandavas.
In the sedation of pethidine
I reeled like a feather :
I buried the mother in me,
but when I saw you—
a lump of lovely plaster-of-paris
in a plastic bucket which somehow
looked like Kamsa's weapon of destruction—
I again felt like taking you to my bosom
to feel your lips groping for milk,

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to stare into your searching eyes,
to make you whole again.
I also wanted to spit
the amniotic fluid
on the faces of these people
for finding out a way
to kill you so easily :
but, child, these are only words of grief.
I only wish there were drugs
to dry up a feeling heart,
as there are to dry up milk.

FIELDS OF COMPROMISE

Without warning,
the breeze from a slow fan
eddies into a regular storm.

As two octopus-egos
box with sixteen hands,
no referee interferes :
this fighting ring becomes the forum
for unveiling grievances.
Angry shrieks on one side,
and intolerant stamping out on the other,
as the curtain drops on a meaningless scene.

It is as if a civil curfew is clamped.
Almost all the strands of yarn
of this relationship break in this tug-of-war :
yet there's not enough courage
to snap the ties altogether.
A protest rally begins
with scowls as banners
and pursed lips as standards.

He leaves behind his 'yours faithfully' face
among the office files;
and she erases her smiles and pranks.
The child, bewildered by the problem,

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struggles like a fly
caught in an upturned glass.

Conversation becomes a balancing act.
The night of fulfilment
casts them apart on the cot,
as Bhima did Jarasandha.
The woodpecker clock
ticks away the night hours of silence.
Pride parades as self-respect,
discontent flows, with self-pity
as its tributary.

Like people becoming normal
when the storm abates,
impatience melts
in the heat of necessity.
Suddenly a tight knot loosens,
and smiles drop like pearls.
As pressure comes down,
the mercury touches 'fair weather.'
The white dove flaps its wings.
Marriage ideals are flaunted again.
Rancour and acrimony are buried
and the sapling of compromise is planted
in this field of cat-and-dog relationship
called holy wedlock. □

Translated by D. Kesava Rao

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Aduri Satyavathi Devi

LIKE A COLOSSUS

Whenever he runs into me
The stink envelopes me first
Embalming his skin with earth
He enters like clay sundered by the wintry wind
With a basket of dung over head.
He infuses life into the awaiting plants
Combing and caressing the roots.
Greeting with his looks
He teaches words to the sprouting twigs in silence.
Doctoring the infested and the diseased
He bathes the Banana sapplings
Like newborn babies
Standing them in order as school children.
Taking the charity of his labour
And relishing the music of his crooning
The tap roots transform to milky-ways.
Been sun-burnt the whole day
Sweat and soil disconcerting,
He asks for water becoming a bowl of thirst.
Bringing it in a dazzling steel vessel, I demur.
Reading the essence of my actions
He drinks his thirst out cupping his hands
And throws at me a smiling glance.
I sink my head into that look
Which bears the aeonean nobility and forgiveness.
He walks away ...
Like a Colossus
Straight and upright.

Translated by N.S. Murty

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MYRIAD-WINGED BIRD

Word is a child's play; a dove
that creeps into me
when I am caught in the midst of alphabets
that gently revolve round my head.

Rolling in the cradle of fairy tales
as I reach out for rabbit-like moon-ears
and crossing, as usual, cloud-treasures,
while I enter into starry tents
word becomes a lullaby.

While sleeping over dream-lids
of velvet flowery fragrance
of silken youth
word approaches me like a song
in a season of wild blooms.

When I bid farewell to dreams in song
subsuming myself in lonely journeys
and relentless fires,
word reasures me, offering me
mother's breast milk.

When I consume time timidly
circling round like a spider
and facing humiliations like a caterpillar
that has lost its way
word becomes a school in itself.

When I join nightingale-clubs, smelling of poetry,
and enter the pages of human history
from the fret of life
word cleanses me like a water-fall
in a magnetic field of moonlight.

Word is a throat-box, a music-treasure,
on my gentle loving palm
as I flow towards distant melodies
of new horizons.

Translated by K. Damodar Rao

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Pemmaraju Gopalakrishna

A DESIRE TO BE ...

A request
before you turn the light on

Make sure
darkness doesn't recur

A plea
before you open the window

Make sure
the stench that has left
doesn't return

An advice
before you bare your heart

Make sure
you plant seeds of friendship

WHAT DETERMINES?

A stone
thrown into
a clear mind-lake

Ripples circle
to the lake's end

Thoughts flow
from the point
of contact
to the last wave

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Only
the force of the throw
the spread of the wave
determine the extent of
happiness or sorrow.

□

Translated by M. Sridhar and Alladi Uma

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M. Sridhar

AUSTERITY WAS JUST AN EXCUSE

"The future belongs to us"—
Claim the makers of my new scooter
Three months of driving into the future proved costly indeed.
I took a U-turn into the past :
The wait at the stop,
The slow majestic rides sitting,
watching the school boy, the young college girls,
the pregnant woman, the lady with three kids
Or standing on half a leg
grumbling the push, the dig in the ribs,
the stamp on the toe,
the smell of sweat, the suffocation
and the long wait to get out.

A nostalgia for that enjoyment of the present
as it slowly slides forward into the future
overtakes me.

I couldn't see myself moving
away from the centre, all alone.
Damn this isolation—
I hopped on to the next bus.

Austerity was just an excuse.
I was in love with the crowd. □

Translated by the Poet

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Ramateertha

GRATITUDE

Welcome, untimely intruder
It is centuries since
The Thinktank went to loo
And the Seer
is still groping
with dimmed glasses—

The opportunist went out in a hurry
And the revolutionary is busy
In the forest,
kidnapping a wisp of coriander—

This is a pyre
Burning in phases.

Having come here, do drop a log,
I'll be thankful.

FIRST NIGHT

First night
I neither knew how the bed was made
Nor felt comfortless and crammed—
The bosom is handy
But I couldn't be a game.
In the place cut
Unaware I am of the blood jetting.
A pair of arms surrounded me
And ardent breath warmed my face.

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Right from that night
Becoming a kisses-showering nimbus
On my entire childhood, inceasantly showering
A long affectionate season of rains
was my mother. □

Translated by the Poet

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"AGAIN, YET AGAIN"

I walk bare foot
into a half-burnt, falling
smouldering remains of a forest;
return empty-handed
my heart inflamed
by memories
of countless letters undelivered.
Remembrances intrude like sharp nails
into the silent comfort of a midnight sleep
Eyes tear-glaze
as memories chase tranquil sleep-clouds.
Why intrude my loneliness—
having deserted,
having thrown me into my onlyness?
How tormented I was
that afternoon
when you laughed
as my emotions parched expression!
How flared
at the unquenching
flowers, land and sky!
Why would you remember
how shamelessly I exhibited
my aching desire for you,
those innocently stealthy glances
those tear-filled eyes?
I have spent hours
just for one moment.
How I pity myself now
being burnt
by those very waiting moments!

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yet memories slide
like leaves and flowers.
Shouldn't those evenings
fleeing falteringly some where
slip from beneath my feet,
this shaky earth,
over these uneasy steps
over those sweet smiling lips? □

Translated by M. Sridhar and Alladi Uma

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Kondepudi Nirmala

ELDER DAUGHTER

Standing riveted at a distance
from the six-month old in mother's lap
and the four-year old brother
riding piggyback on father,
the former child
with neither a lap nor a back
looks preplexed,
not knowing how to grow young again.

She lost her childhood
when still a child
and doesn't know
how to get it back,
that it can't be bought in a shop
like a new ribbon or a pencil
which she might ask father
to buy for her.

She wanted to ask father and mother
so many questions,
but their world was so full of brother and sister;
the crescent moon of yesterday
is now a flower drenched in questions.
She decides to find out
from the elder sister of the neighbour boy
how he is still a child, though twelve.

She cannot recall
a single incident from her childhood :
how soon have they melted
like icecream in the hot sun.
She must have slept soundly
in mother's lap or father's back,

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that must be the reason for forgetting.
If she knew she would grow older,
she might have kept herself awake.
Her rocking horse, the ragdoll Buddha,
the wrist watch with glowing numerals
were still there as mementos of her childhood.
Memories of mother's kisses
or father's bristly chin
recede in the remembrances
of the hospital smells, the childbed,
and grandparents
which changed her
into a grownup girl.
If god is angry,
he might probably give you
long legs that shorten your gowns,
or flowing locks that get knotted
after shampooing.

But yesterday
she had a nice day-dream
(not a day-dream, really,
but an idea) :
What if she went back
from talking, running,
todding and crawling,
back to wailing in the cradle,
and then to mother's womb.

transforming these two jealous kids
into grownups?

THE RIVER OF SORROW KARNA BATHED IN

Forgive me, mother;
I know that because society doesn't approve,
because I've no father,
a useless signature
at every step in my life,
my being has made you a bird

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with a broken wing,
my very movement has made you
a prisoner for life,
my hunger had made you
a fruitless tree,
and my howls have
turned you a deaf-mute.

Mother, forgive me;
a woman's motherhood
has become an involuntary drip of milk
because of a cowardly male,
the groping tender lips—
still feeling the pain of umbilical separation—
get only salty tears for a feed
and timidity has relegated her
to infant's linen.

Mother, I don't want to live in this world;
I can't bear to look at the tree
which is undecided about sprouting,
the river of sorrow
that Karna bathed in
still flows,

Will you bless it
or curse it?

Translated by D. Kesava Rao

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Papineni Sivashankar

BROKEN PLOUGH

Vultures find no fault with
the pesticides that killed farmers
instead of insects.
When the generous soil revolted,
when the sky fell on their heads
the throne only throws the blame
on Nature and evades answers.

Only a moment of hot concern
for those who sip tea and
sensational morning news.
For a while crocodile tears will be sent
through public taps.
Death-ceremonies, enquiry-offerings will go on
unabated.
Facts will be buried in mouldy files.
Everyone gets busy with his own mire of a routine.

He is a man of his soil.
He could not severe his bonds with his land.
He did not know why the yoke became heavy,
why the yield is alienated.
Since self-respect is all that saved,
he sacrificed his soul, already in debt.
The dumb animal in the cow-shed weeps
for the vanished hand
that offered its daily feed.

The land does not deceive.
The crime is someone else's.
I question those who grabbed the crop
and stabbed him in the back.
I question those who mortgaged

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the nation's backbone in
inter-continental transactions.
I question the dark money and its watch-dogs
that will earn the wrath of the corpses.

When they became mere specks of their soil
they assiduously cultivated—
it was not suicide.
It can only be murder.
My question is—
who did it? □

Translated by K. Damodar Rao

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Nandini Sidhareddy

CONSCIOUSNESS

He had no sight
as yet.
They poured acid in his eyes
I gained vision.

THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

You interpret
our silence as
lassitude.
Perhaps you don't know
even a gun on the wall
is silent!

□

Translated by M. Sridhar

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Sivasagar

TIANANMEN SQUARE

Festoons of severed heads
as offerings to the Arch of Heavenly Bliss.

A slight wink of the fuming dragon
unfolds a roll-call of death at the executioner's platform.

In the prohibited city, now on siege,
blood turned into lakes!

Frozen Yang-tzee
now singing an elegy!.

This is the domain of vultures,
the reign of demons

this is the act put on by the dragon
in the guise of the red-flag.

Even an insect repels under iron feet,
even a bird assumes wings under iron feet.

The tides of people's ocean cannot be ploughed with tanks
the songs of people's liberation cannot be felled by cannons.

A broken tear-drop on the edge of midnight's words in pitch darkness
Surely, the forging dragon will be humble.

Into the fist of executioners platform
there emerges the sun's awakening song!

Don't sing a dirge, frozen Yang-tzee,
sing a rhyme of revolt, sing a song of liberation, frozen Yang-tzee!

WAIT FOR ME

You look out for me, wait for me.
I will emerge again, come to see you once again

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from the song that was hanged
from the waterfall that was imprisoned
from the path that was wounded.

I will emerge again, come to see you once again
from the breathing-air, from the wafting breeze
You look out for me, wait for me.

I will emerge again, come to see you once again
from the awakened sand-particles
from the first rain-drop
from the flute, with edges smeared in blood,
from the fields ploughed on the forehead
from the whistling of wind, from the glare of the sun
from the smell of soil,
from downwards :
You look out for me, wait for me.

At the hour of the cow-dust
as the roar of the ocean touches the sky,
henna reddens the palm
the star-lights render silent music
and as the ship leaves the coast
I will emerge again, come to see you once again.
Look out for me, wait for me.

When birds adorn the boughs with music
when the fallen trees unravel secrets of life in winter
When Mother's breast-milk flows over me
When most have forgotten me
I will emerge again, come to see you once again.
Look out for me, wait for me.

Where earth meets the sky
where *ponna* flowers are all around on the ground
where the street-lights hanged themselves
where the tear-drops of underground room became wild fire
You look out for me, wait for me.
I will emerge again, come to see you once again.

Where Godavari greets the sky

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where the forests of dense lies are felled
where an indomitable will waves as red flag
you look out for me, wait for me.
I will emerge again, come to see you once again.

You reject the official story that I have bitten dust
you boycott the 'memorial days' organised by Kautilya
you play my music on all the streets.
I have no death—no rope can hang me.
I will emerge from your tears full of pride
I will emerge from the centre of the Sun
I will play the flute, resuscitate its breath
I will shake hands with the roaring ocean
I will fly high as a flag hoisted on the sky-building.

You look out for me, wait for me.
I will emerge again, come to see you once again.
My name is Mruthyunjaya, conqueror of death.
You wait for me, look out for me.
I will emerge again
come to see you once again. □

Translated by K. Damodar Rao

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Sowbhagya

ANANTAPUR

It is a sunscorched sorrow of wilderness,
a stranger to greenery: emaciated cacti
feed on stones, languish like inscriptions of
past glory:

in the dread of open spaces
a hill stands petrified: an old dying tree
on the top wails: beware!

Men, dried branches,
search for the life-giving sap, live in the
dream of future: villages dot the dreary continent
where not a blade of grass grows.
A soiled rag, cover for nakedness, is the sail
that hauls life between stone age and
civilisation,

banyan trees, hair
dishevelled, strike their proproots deep
to probe the romantic secrets of
Krishnaraya's time.

If only crops grow with fire,
and not with water, if stones flower in the heat
of the sun, not with manure,
then perhaps spring renews itself here
in aridity.
As the pitiless sun, the rain showers
no mercy,

clouds are the missing
papers in the files of the sky:
melting in fitful fancies, Anantapur
is fashioning itself to be
tomorrow's desert.

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THE LAND OF STONES*

These silent stones
patient squatters
in dew and in the burning sun—

are they the stones
the sky-crow has dropped
to drink up water
and is now perched above
unrelieved blue
People hopefully
scour the skies
for a *gandharva*
who would melt these stones
with his song

are these the left-over morsels
of food of the *Rakshasas* of yore
or the huge eggs of giant birds
or the magnified images of
country bombs hurled playfully
hills stony hills

Perhaps these stones,
refuges of wild lizards,
are the frozen locks of rishis
buried in the ground
praying for rains.

---

* Raḷḷaseema (The land of stones) is a sobriquet for Rayalaseema (The land of Krishnadeva Raya), a chronic drought-stricken area of Andhra Pradesh.

Translated by D. Kesava Rao

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Yakoob

ARCH OF DARKNESS

Moments stand still
while falling from the sky.
Hundreds of feet walk over you.
Birds' nests pile up on the body.
Someone cries it is not your voice
and the last drop sinks in the eyes.
Without your knowledge
a clock of apprehensions hangs on your body
like radium threads—
Impatience, stuck to the chair,
crawls on every inch of the body.

Throwing the sounds from thought-windows
into the open space
you hide in yourself.
You don't notice the fear of sweat
on your feet.
You don't hear your throat
crushing every sound.
You look at yourself, time and again,
amidst sobs.

You now need a vision,
a rudder that steers onto new horizons.

DEATH, NO LONGER A FAIRY TALE

Death is not a grandmother's tale now.
It does not frighten anyone, anymore.
As it has turned out,
death is only an animal, man-clad!
It is time for a pilgrimage
whether to Ayodhya or Kurukshetra!

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Everyone is ready
with his own rope, match-stick,
a murder and a suicide.

We are no longer afraid of death
in any quarter.
Without any qualms
someone coolly comes and sets fire
to the man in us.
In the scrimmage, someone dies as easily,
falling beneath himself.
We no longer need any weapon.
One man is enough.

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SECOND TRADITION

Vemana

1. Don't think of avenging
your worst enemy if caught;

One generous gesture is enough
to let him go
and die.

Vema,
you endeared yourself to the creator,
now listen! (No. 42)

2. Countless are those who find fault
with others;

Anyone born on the earth is prone
to blunder;

Those always engaged in pointing fingers
at others
are not conscious of their very
own errors.

Vema,
you endeared yourself to the creator,
now listen! (No. 52)

3. So close are salt and camphor
in appearance;
A closer scrutiny marks out
the difference.

So do sages differ from
ordinary mortals, listen Vema

the one endeared to the creator! (No. 21)

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4. A crocodile, when in waters,
is strong enough to slight an elephant;

Outside the waters,
even a dog humbles it;

Wherever a person is,
his position is decided not by his might
but the weight of the place does it.

Vema,
you endeared yourself to the creator,
now listen! (No. 67)

5. A tool, even if broken into pieces,
can be assembled by the skills of a blacksmith.

Is it possible that way
if heart is broken?

Vema, the one endeared to the creator,
listen! (No. 16)

6. What happens
if rice is offered
to the already overfed?

He will throw it away.
Will it be different if a rich man
is still offered donations?

Vema,
you endeared yourself to the creator,
now listen! (No. 4)

7. The mean one always speaks eloquently.
A sincere man speaks plainly.

In creating sound-rhythms
can gold be compared with bronze?

Vema, you endeared yourself to the creator,
now listen! (No. 9)

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THAT MAN ON THE ROAD

Madhurantakam Rajaram

ONE fiery summer. Not yet twelve noon; but it was already burning hot. The whole world was like the Sun God's own court in plenary session. And so hushed, you got the feeling that if a tiny ant stirred you could hear it. Even the leaves on the trees stopped rustling; the lower creatures, such as squirrels and crows, sat lurking behind boughs. Probably in the following day's newspaper would be published the news that today's temperature had broken the record of the last five or six years.

Like a girdle-string around the waist of the Earth Goddess could be seen the trunkroad between Rangampet and Timmapuram.

The road was almost totally deserted.

On either side of the road, a thick jungle.

Even those cattle which had come to graze in the jungle did not come into the open; they sheltered themselves behind bushes.

In one word, the whole area looked like a picture hung on a wall.

Only one thing moved. On the trunk road, like a dragonfly, glided a car. Forty villages or hamlets around knew hat the car belonged to Narasappa garu.

Narasappa garu had poured twentyfive thousand rupees to buy that car. He was providing livelihood to a driver with a salary of one hundred twenty rupees a month. The trunk road had been laid by the 'government' folks. Having had his fill of his breakfast, the gentleman was seated in the car. There was no need to tell the driver to go fast. And the road was smooth, without holes and hollows, giving the wrong impression that it had been specially laid for expensive cars. Though the entire world around was burning, the interior of the vehicle was cool, like the mind of a great hermit who

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had overcome all passions. It was so pleasant.

To reach the cigarette carton inside his pocket, Narasappa garu leaned slightly to one side. Taking the cigarette carton from his pocket, he looked out through the glass window of the car. One moment. Just one moment. In the brief period of one moment, Narasappa garu noticed a form on the road ... Who was it? Who might it be?

Narasappa garu lit up a cigarette. He took one puff and as he let the smoke out, his memory which was drowsy until then, suddenly woke up.

A towel cloth around the waist, on top a headcloth. Beyond this there was no other protection. The beard had grown like a thorny bush.

The face had wrinkled. Perspiration streamed down his whole body, in rills and rivulets. A staff in the hand. A body that had emaciated badly. This individual was known to Narasappa garu! His name: Ranganna.

'Ranganna appears to have aged a lot,' thought Narasappa garu.

Forty years ago, this Ranganna had been like an iron rod. A *kantey* (circlet) round his neck, tapering moustaches, a fencing pole in his hand. In this costume, he used to look like a warrior of the battle-hungry Palanaadu of an earlier age. Narasappa garu still remembered it well. A Russell's viper, a species of venomous snake, was spotted one day under the jasmine creeper. Immediately word was sent to Ranganna who was supervising weeding in the fields. Until he arrived no one dared to go anywhere near the jasmine creeper. With the staff in his hand Ranganna probed the creeper. The snake dashed away and fled to the top of the compound wall. That was an earthen wall. Five cubits tall. On top of it they had piled light rocks and then packed it with soil for a coping. How Ranganna jumped up on the wall no one knew. He sped along the narrow top like a lightning. He chased and finished off the snake. A Ranganna who had performed such a circus feat so effortlessly was now unable to walk erect even on the tar-topped road. The inexorability of time!

At the vision of Ranganna, the thoughts of Narasappa garu began digging up the past. By the time he had grown to an awareness of things, Ranganna was a young man. He had developed the belief by then that all those impossible things in the world, which ordinary mortals could not do, only Ranganna could manage. He could climb

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up toddy palms and with great ease hack down the fruit bunches. In the coconut grove he could cross over high above from one palm to another. From the topmost branch of a mango tree covered thick with big black ants, he could bring down a fruit. He could capture the pigeons nesting in the high *gopuram* of the temple. Not just in carrying out his wishes, the wishes of a little boy, for whatever the other members of the family could not do, Ranganna was found handy. When Ranganna bent down to reach a sheaf of paddy stalks to neatly pile the haystack he looked like the *Siva Dhanussu* (the great bow of Lord Siva). When he stood erect, he looked like the flag staff on top of the hill. God forbid, what would happen if he were to slip and fall, he had worried. For that matter, all dangers were an everyday matter for Ranganna. Once relatives from another village came for bride-viewing. One of those gentlemen was bathing seated on a step, and the ring on his finger slipped and dropped into the well. It was a big eight-ringed well; the water came up to the fifth ring. And at the bottom: deadly moss; if a man's legs or hands got caught in it, it was as good as being buried alive. So many people attempted to dissuade him in so many ways but Ranganna did not heed them. Just jumped into the well. For two or three minutes there was no sign of the man; some among those present curled up their lips, saying they had seen the last of Ranganna. But Ranganna did not die; nor did he surface without recovering the ring.

Narasappa garu now closed his eyes. The house in which he lived now had been constructed by his *naanna* garu (father). *Naanna* garu may have spent money for the construction! But viewed from the angle of physical labour who had built and given him the house? Or who constructed that house? For the water to mix the earth, who had driven the bullocks of the pulley well? Standing in the hot sun who had got the mud bricks cut? Who had felled the tamarind trees? Who had got the kiln set up and had the bricks baked? Above everything else, who had, without the knowledge of the forest guard or watchers, got the *nereydu* (jamun) trees felled and during the same night carted them through devious paths along the hedges?

Those who don't like Narasappa garu say all kinds of things. Whatever one may say, an ungrateful man he was not. To prove that, the fact that his eyes moistened now was enough!

Because the driver may by some chance notice it, Narasappa garu lowered his head a little.

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One day he had pestered Ranganna to bring down some *seemachinta* (manila tamarind) fruit for him. The house in which he lived with his wife and children was situated in the *seemachinta* grove only. Asking him to keep eating the fruit, Ranganna went to his hut and returned. Walls that were not even knee-high, doors woven of bamboo strips, roof made of coconut branches: for pigs they raise stys, that hut was no better.

'In this place .. how are you able to live Ranganna?' he had asked him.

'What can we do, little master? We are poor people. It is a great thing that we have at least this kind of place to live. No matter! When you grow up, won't it be good if you construct a better house than this and give it to us?' What a small thing to do! The fine resolution that he could easily repay Ranganna's good services by that much at least came to him that very moment. But then he was at that time still a little boy. He was just seven or eight! Nothing was lost. For good resolutions to be translated into good acts there was still plenty of time.

Then Narasappa garu had to go to the town for studies. During those ten or twelve years, he used to visit his native village only once in a while, during some vacation. More than the studies in the town it is the artificial civilization that fascinates rural students. It was not as though no such change was seen in Narasappa garu.

'Are you keeping well, little master?' if Ranganna greeted him Narasappa garu felt rather uncomfortable. It was as though the doors of his heart had been locked with a big Aligarh lock. So many changes are coming about in the world. Some people get incomes from their agricultural crops; some others make profits from their businesses; yet others have promotional ladders available to them in their jobs. 'We have no granaries, we have no dawns' said a poet. Of such unfortunate fellows Ranganna seems to be the sole surviving representative.

His body lost its strength and vigour. In the family the count of kids had gone up. If any urchin was seen anywhere near the hut, in the streets or outside in the fields, wearing just a cloutpiece, he must necessarily be a son of Ranganna's. If, clad in rags, with unkempt hair, a girl child was seen, she must be a daughter of Ranganna's. 'Look here, Ranganna! Why can't you get them stitched a clean pair of clothes? Aren't there schools which take students without charging a single *dammidi* (a coin of the smallest denomination)! Why can't you

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send them to school? There is no rule that those who are on the ground should remain forever on the ground. I know you don't have the money! If only you ask my *naanna* garu wont he give?'

Some such consoling words Narasappa garu felt like offering, but then can any good be done with mere preaching? If he could, he must do it and show to the world. He was no more than a college student. Is it easy to translate one's ideals into acts? Shouldn't he first wait for the keys to fall into his hands?

They reached him. Even the keys came into his hands.

But then so many obstacles to a good act.

When at last he was about to execute his ideas, his mother came in the way. 'Not that way, son? Are you really registering five acres in Ranganna's name? Why? What do you think he will do with it? Does he have a pair of bullocks? At least, is there a well in the land you want to give him? Can he manure his fields? I am telling you, just do it and see. Before the end of the year if he won't sell away his piece of land ask me ...'

Possible. That even sounded probable.

Alternatively, he wanted to send the boys to school, but they were by that time past the school-going age.

Ranganna was content if he could procure the next meal. His boys were not so steady. In search of their luck they had gone each in a different direction.

Ten years ago his wife had passed away.

No house. No children. No wife. All the links with that village had been cut, he thought. Where exactly the old man was spending his last days, he did not know!

Vaguely, he remembered that one of his daughters Raganna had given in marriage to someone in this area somewhere.

Probably he was now headed that way!

But then in this hot sun!

Probably he wasn't even wearing a pair of chappals!

Pouring out his sweat, kneading his bones, melting his muscles, every drop of his blood in his body he had expended on others, that man ...

He could go by bus. He wouldn't have the money for the fare.

How early he must have started!

How long ago had he eaten!

Ayyo, poor fellow! He could not even get a house raised for him.

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Even a little immovable property he could not arrange for him. No could he provide for the future of his children.

Even then Ranganna was so easy to please.

If he could ask the driver to stop and take him into the car, he would rejoice as though his life had been fulfilled.

Another good resolution had occurred to Narasappa garu.

But then by now the car had passed Ranganna and was speeding over the tenth mile beyond.

Translated by Ranga Rao

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In The Shades Of The Mahabodhi

Munipalle Raju

"Would you like to remain a tree, oh dear tree? You may not be able to! The wicked would cut you to pieces. Better transform yourself into the handle of an axe. The wicked will then disturb you no more!"
(A Sindhi Poet)

"NAARAAYANA ... NAARAAYANA ..." chanted all the relatives in unison.

"Naaraayana ... Naaraayana.." caught on our cousins, cognates and other distant relatives.

The whole place, which had been quiet for a while, was now suddenly permeated with grief. My maternal and paternal uncles and a couple of others picked up the four corners of the bier and lifted it to their shoulders.

Perhaps, the chanting of the Name was the signal. How would I know? I could not even guess my own age at that stage of my life.

But, I could make it out to be the last journey of my father. My father's elder brother appeared to lead the funeral procession ritualistically without looking back. He held the ends of the sling carrying the pot of live coals.

I wriggled out of the hands of Varaalakkayya and aunt Hanumaayamma, who were holding me back firmly till then, and joined the procession.

I could hear the exchanges, lamentations and screams from behind.

"Poor fellow ... he is still so very young."

"He was in fact playing in his father's lap even yesterday morning."

"What a fate. It would have been a bit better had his thread ceremony been performed."

Amongst the many voices, aunt Hanumayamma's agitation.

"Seshayyaa ... why are you just watching ... stop the boy ... ayyo .. he may end up scared."

"What can this Seshayya do, he himself is a bundle of nerves." Varaalakkayya's concern.

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Seshayya held me and stopped me midway. He was our share cropper. He used to make clay tops for me to play with daily.

"We should not be going to the funeral ground *Chinnayya* (young master)."

"Why not?"

"Ghosts and spirits roam around there."

Even as Seshayya was saying this, I felt that somebody was whispering tenderly in my ears, "It's a lie .. It's a lie."

I looked around. Nothing was to be seen. I looked up towards the sky.

It was then that I saw the sprawling tree. Such a mighty tree in our village? I started wondering. It rustled. It showered its dry leaves on me as though to console me.

That was my first acquaintance with the tree.

The past is like mist, poets say. They say it melts back into oblivion. It is not so in my case. Even after such a long time I still remember that episode vividly. Whenever I think of it, it stands in front of me like an image in the mind that cannot be captured in words.

Kolli Seshayya was making clay tops and was indulging in all sorts of tricks to assuage my grief. But I kept looking at the tree. It even had aerial roots dropping on one side. Countless bird nests to the top most sprigs ... chirping and cheeping the birds kept on casting their droppings. The droppings were falling straight into the tank alongside. How large was the tank! Tiny fish kept swimming towards the droppings and swallowing them with relish. Birds on the tree, fish in the pond and a toddy grove on the other side of the tank ...

I could also see the crimson setting sun across the toddy grove. In the sky, clouds were moving briskly.

Leaning against the tree ... watching that marvel of nature ... when I dozed off, I did not know. By the time I rubbed my eyes and looked around, Seshayya was not there.

All our relatives, just back from the funeral of my father, were taking their ritual bath at the tank-side well.

The *bairaagis* camping in the *math* of Raavula Subbamma were cooking rice over a fire made out of twigs and dry leaves they had gathered.

Bells were ringing in the choultry of Soodulagunta Kotayya.

It appeared that a Guru of one of the village landlords was

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camping in the choultry. Our people came looking for me.

"Seshayya ... where is Seshayya ...?"

"Must be enjoying a puff of *ganja* with those *bairaagis*."

"Abandoned the child alone, crazy son of a whore!"

Perhaps I was not able to explain to them that I was not alone but in conversation with the tree, which I had continued even when I had dozed off, and so was not scared.

Some time later, during my childhood itself, Kolli Seshayya, my clay tops friend, actually joined the *bairaagis* and disappeared. I distinctly remember that his wife Rattamma and his aged mother Naagamma used to visit mother and wail loudly.

How often did I witness that grief and misery! How often did Rattamma embrace me and showed me the deep wounds in her heart without resorting to a thousand page commentary on it!

I used to cross over to the southern streets and by-lanes of the village, reach the tree at the northern end and sit under it silently.

"Seshayya does exist. He is in search of himself. He is roaming the caves and cliffs to get out of his own shadow."

Would you believe that these words were uttered by the great tree? You won't.

After school, instead of my engaging in games at home, Seshayya used to take me to play games around the great tree and perambulate it ... used to seat me with the *gosains* of the *math* and make me listen to their *tatwams* (philosophical songs) ... used to show me—from above the steps of the choultry—the smoke rising over the funeral ground ... used to walk me over the pathways around the toddy grove and the cactus clumps—I never discussed these things with anybody at home.

I used to wonder whether Seshayya—who acquainted me with the tree and the tree—which acquainted me with the many living things around—were they not one and the same?

Rattamma's wound would heal up if only she could stand under the tree for a few minutes ... but how do I convey this to her? Was it possible for me to convey such a deep mystic idea in simple day-to-day terms? I was but a child.

However, it became possible after twenty years. I was then working at a far away place. Rattamma got my mother to write a letter to me.

A *sadhu* had come from the North and was camping under the

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tree. He declared himself to be Seshayya. Except for his age, he was of the same appearance .. with the same mole under the right ear ... the same sunken eyes. He spoke a mixture of Telugu and Hindi.

The villagers were inducing him to renounce *sanyaas* and take back Rattamma. She subjected him to many tests. Her mother-in-law, Naagamma, had already passed away under the grief for her son. He recognised some of the villagers. And failed to recognise some others.

He was able to pin-point the exact corner of the house where Rattamma used to secretly keep the small earthern pot of coins. He was looking at Rattamma with anguish. Yet Rattamma was not very sure ... I was called on only to conduct the final tests.

The very next day of my arrival at the village, Rattamma took me to the *sadhu*. He was sitting under the tree in the lotus posture.

The moment I entered the shade of the tree, a dry twig fell on my head. A tiny twig. I looked up. The crows were cawing and flying away.

I offered the orange—given by mother—to the *sadhu* and stood in front of him. I looked straight into his eyes. No response.

"Seshayya ... who am I?"

A smile. I glanced at Rattamma. She looked at me.

I picked up a lump of alluvial soil from the bank of the tank and gave it to him.

"Seshayya. Won't you make a top for me?"

Did he not understand? He stared at me in confusion.

I explained in Hindi: "*Lattoo ... Lattoo banaavo* Seshayya."

He did not react. The lump of earth remained in his hand.

"Thief ... *Chor* .."

The leaves of the tree started rustling. '*Chor ... Chor ..!*'

Leaving his *kamandal* behind, the *sadhu* took to his heels. I saw the village youth, who had been watching the drama till then, chasing him with staves.

Fearing that Rattamma might react with loud lamentation, beat her chest and merge with nothingness by jumping into the tank, I stayed back.

But, she sat quietly on the jutting roots of the tree for a long time. Her eyes were not even moist. I then suddenly recollected the antecedents of the impostor. During my childhood, when Seshayya was still around, this fellow had camped at the *math* for some time.

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He had made friends with Seshayya. They used to indulge in bouts of *ganja* together. I was mistaken to believe that he was looking at Rattamma with anguish. It was not anguish, but pure lust.

This memory flashed across my mind when I was perambulating the tree involuntarily. Was Seshayya still in search of himself? Or, had this impostor finished him off?

Who would heal this new wound in Rattamma? As I was contemplating this, Rattamma spoke.

"*Chinnayya*, would you light my pyre when I am gone?"

She is neither of my caste nor clan. Surprised, I looked at her. The tree had probably made her say that. I could see her spirit. I said 'yes'. At the same time, I expressed a doubt, "I may be at a far away place. How will I know?"

"You will somehow come to know of it, *Chinnayya*" she said rising.

I did get the call after two years. I was listening to a recorded talk of Jiddu Krishna Murthy in a friend's house in a faraway state that night. That LP was about the story of a tree on a river bank.

On receiving the telegram, our duty officer rang up everywhere and finally located me. He read out the message to me over the telephone. I set out that very midnight.

I did not feel that Rattamma would cast away her body so soon; noticing so much clarity in her speech and sharpness in her sight, how could I anticipate? Her body was, of course, a bit emaciated.

But, Rattamma's words made it clear that what is apparent may not be true and what is hidden may be the real truth.

"So, you did come, *Chinnayya*. I knew you would."

I attempted to assure her. She brushed that aside.

"I have some landed property ... my own 'woman's property'. I have willed it to the school where you studied. I have left nothing for you."

"Why do I need anything Rattamma? I am in a good job."

"Don't incur heavy expenditure on my last rites."

"Don't bring in matters of money here. Let me know your last wish. I work near Kasi. Shall I immerse your ashes in the Ganga?"

"No need *Chinnayya*. I like that tree a lot. And in case Seshayya returns at any time, look after him."

"Certainly. He will be with me."

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I just played deaf to the murmurs of resentment of her brothers-in-law. She was cremated that evening. On the day of the collection of ashes I made oblong beds among the roots of the tree and deposited this great manure there. Though their silence spoke their minds, none of my relatives objected to this.

The birds on the tree and the fish in the pond must have observed this. The birds, which returned to their nests that evening, did not make any strange sounds which would have kindled grief in my heart. I waited till the moon rose and set off on my return journey the same night.

But, I forgot to narrate the story of the intervening period. The story of my growing association with the tree.

Within four years of my father's demise, we found ourselves in a pathless desert. Our joint family had disintegrated. The burden of loans taken by father fell on us. Mother disposed off the lands to clear the debts.

Even close relatives started ignoring us. Mother started taking up odd jobs in the neighbouring houses. The high school campus to which I had just been introduced and the tender friendships that were blossoming just then went out of my reach.

I took up the job of a *coolie* in a rice mill which had newly sprung up on the border of our village and the neighbouring Vellaturu.

There was nothing like daily wages or a monthly salary. My job was to collect brawn that piled up on one side and fill it up in the gunny bags. In return, the farmers whose paddy was getting milled dropped a few fistfuls of rice in my basket.

But, this very life of a labourer formed the basis for my daily interaction with the tree. While returning from the rice mill, I used to wash off the dust at the tank and sit serenely under the tree.

While departing, I used to gather a few dry twigs which used to supplement the dry paddy roots mother used to collect from the fields to make up the kitchen fire.

Did my association with the tree get limited to the dry twigs? Was it not an extension of my association with Seshayya? Such were the thoughts that came to me.

Numerous carts carrying countless passengers used to camp on the tank-bund in the shade of the tree. If they all were passengers moving with the tides of bliss and misery, with their own desires and

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passions—who am I?

Until then, I had sat in the lap of the tree with affection ... without expecting anything in return. Would this twig-gathering activity affect that natural affinity? I stopped collecting twigs from that day.

I do not know how much older I had become in that single year but I noticed myself being engulfed by my thoughts ... wave after wave.

Another remarkable thing happened—under the very tree I learned fasting.

On a mealless day ... unaffected by thirst and hunger ... in a cyclonic gale ... in the devilish dance of rain ... snugly sitting in the lap of the tree ... listening to the faint sounds of the *bhajans* of the *bairaagis* ... when I returned home, mother was full of fear and anxiety. "Gurunatham says that you are always sitting under that tree. Is that true?"

What could I tell her? Which mysterious yet fascinating experiences could I explain to her? Could I tell her that the woman who was on her way to a maternity home on a rainy day had the first glimpse of her new-born child under that tree? Could I tell her how furious I was with that tree on the day when the washerwoman Venkati ended her life there?

The ancient wisdom being imparted by the tree that I should become a part of the Invisible Matter is unfathomable even to me. What could I then say to mother? What could I? I didn't say anything.

The aesthetic experience that I could not explain to mother, the essence of my feelings which I still feel helpless to put in words ... 'that' came my way the very next day.

It was nearing dusk. A bullock cart stopped under the tree. People were moving towards the choultry. Having noticed some human presence, somebody came out with a request "Baaboo ... Where can I get some milk in this village?"

I came forward.

"Do you have a vessel?"

"Yes. Take this money. God will bless you."

"No need for money, sir."

In a quarter of an hour, I returned with milk from Rattamma.

"Everybody parts with what he has got and expects something in return. But you are not accepting anything. Who are you?" he

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persisted with his query.

At last, I narrated to him my story.

The labourer-phase of my life ended the next day.

The student life sprouted again.

He took me to his place after obtaining a tearful nod from mother. I cleared the Benares Matric within a year and then entered college with a scholarship. Completed my F.A. and was midway through my graduation.

At that stage I got a couple of messages about the deteriorating condition of mother's health. With that the student phase of my life took another turn. Since the time I had acquired the ability to fast under the tree, I had perhaps acquired the confidence to achieve any goal just with will power.

I decided not to heed anybody's advice. I set myself a singular goal: that I should attend on mother and save her. I also had a second goal: to redeem my debt of that kindly gentleman who educated me. For this, I needed the blessings of Goddess Lakshmi. With an inhibitionless self confidence, I set my foot in a new world.

I touched the feet of mother who had silently endured hardships and anguish—all alone.

Within a few days she recovered: as if her secret hopes which appeared to have dried up altogether—sprouted again.

That evening, I sat under the tree for a while. Though it was not autumn, surprisingly, I felt that the tree had showered dry leaves on me. I looked up. I immediately remembered my second goal.

"When are you going to redeem yourself of the debt to the one who gave you education? You may in fact clear his debt but can you treat his kindness as mere debt?" I got up wondering as to who had been shooting these questions at me.

When I reached home, I saw Rattamma chatting with mother.

"I have been waiting for you only. You know that Christian Father to whom I supply milk?—There is a vacancy in their school. He asked me to tell you to apply."

That was the time when our village Harijan colonies were transforming themselves into Christian folds. Tiny churches were springing up in all the villages.

Our village school was also established near the church. I joined that school as an untrained teacher. It was there I had my introduction

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to my colleague, Grace.

Grace Jakria was perhaps a little older than me. But she looked younger. Could human beings have so much of grace, health and such large beautiful eyes?—I used to wonder. She was also an untrained teacher like me.

As she walked along with the majesty of a royal elephant with an umberella in hand—which was unusual for ladies of that time—the whole village used to stare at her in open-mouthed wonder. To avoid that embarrassment, she used to take a different route through the shrubs from her nearby village to the school. She followed the same route on return. I used to accompany her up to the village outskirts.

On the way we used to rest for a while under the tree. At times, I used to feel that I had the friendship of a person who was as beautiful as a graceful tree. I never observed her mind very closely. I used to feel that her every movement and every word had an inherent nobility and serenity about them.

But had she been sitting under the tree merely to enjoy that peace and music? It took me months to realise that she had been waiting for the pleasure of touch neither from the breeze nor from the rustling leaves nor the lotus stems in the pond nor the light of the distant stars nor the moon gradually filling the sky—but from me and me alone.

In the privacy of a lonely evening, she suddenly kissed me deeply. She sat in my lap.

"Won't you convert to my religion? We shall get married, go for the teacher's training and settle down with our jobs here" she said all this with great affection which overwhelmed me.

When I did not respond, she was discomfited. She stared into my eyes and said "What is it you are contemplating?"

After a while, she repeated her question.

I looked at the tree without moving an inch.

"Gracie, I have been trying to make out as to which religion the tree belongs."

"You are a fool."

"Yes Gracie. I have no intention of getting married."

Even after that, I did not discontinue accompanying Grace. But, she stopped resting under the tree in my company.

She never touched me again.

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The second world war was raging then. I was yet to repay my debt. I was yet to find relief from my anguish. Japan had occupied all the colonies of the English, the French and the Dutch.

At that juncture, I applied for a commission in the army. I was called up and selected. My maternal uncle came, consoled my mother and took her along with him.

When I was about to leave, Grace came and stood in front of me: under the tree.

"Tell me that you have forgiven me. Then only I would bid you goodbye," she touched my hand with humility.

"It is you who have to forgive. But, do not say goodbye. We will certainly meet again. You will then be either a Head Mistress or a Principal and would receive my application," I said and left.

Why at all did I say that?

Four years later, after the conclusion of the Burma war, discharged from the army, on my way back to my village—I saw her again at the Allahabad railway station. She was alone. Totally broken and in low spirits. She had been deceived by her lover, a Navy officer.

She refused to return home. She insisted on taking revenge on that officer. I tried to dissuade, but it was in vain. "Get me a couple of sarees. That is enough" she said.

We went to the bazaar. I forced upon her a suitcase, a pair of slippers and half a dozen sarees. Pleaded with her to accept half of the currency notes I had in my purse.

"Gracie, we had heard different music under the same tree. I tried to introduce you to my music. I did not succeed."

She did not weep. Touched my hand graciously.

On returning home, I narrated her story to the Father.

"My son, you remind me of the story from the Bible. Jesus Christ will save her. Don't take it to heart."

I never saw her again.

Being an ex-serviceman I could manage to get a good job. Got quick promotions too. As my mother desired, I got married. My children grew up, completed their studies and started standing on their feet.

I could fulfil all my obligations. That of Rattamma and of my educator. In peace, mother merged with the Supreme Being.

But, I was yet to repay my debt to my teacher. As the elders say,

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Teachers are of six types: *Preraka, Soochaka, Vaachaka, Darshaka, Sikshaka* and *Bodhaka.*

I did not see the tree again—which was for me a personification of all the six types of teachers in a singular form—as I spent all my working life in the North.

Now that I had attained superannuation and was about to step into *Vaanaprasthaashrama,* which teacher should I meet first? It was for that meeting I set out now.

My wife tried to dissuade me. My wife's aunt, who had been living with us since our marriage, passed sarcastic comments.

"That house got dilapidated long ago. Where would you stay? Who would recognise you there?" said my wife.

"It is not the house but the tree your husband is going to look for. This madness is hereditary. Why do you try to stop him" said my wife's aunt.

She was having a dig, in fact, at my grandfather who had worked as a plantation supervisor during the days of the *Dhata* famine. He had organised the planting of innumerable trees—the kinds which do not require water to survive—along the grand trunk road.

After a long journey covering a whole day and one full night and thanks to a kind lorry driver, I reached my village at midnight. My house was not all that dilapidated.

The teacher Kantayya, who was residing in my house, arranged a bed and offered me a cup of coffee made out of the milk kept aside that night for his grandson. Having slept well, I got up late the next morning.

My first impulse was to walk towards the tank. I felt as if moving in a strange place. I looked around. It was the same road ... the same street ... the same buildings. Of course their facades were new but the walls were old.

On reaching the spot, I failed to locate the tree. What had happened to the tree? I stopped the very first person I came across and enquired about the tree.

"Which tree?"

"That one ... The great tree which was here ... with aerial roots on one side."

"Oh ... that tree ... that was felled long ago. Don't you know sir ... all this area had been sanctioned to the weaker sections for their

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housing."

I looked at it then: half of the tank was already filled up ... with a hutment or two here and there.

"Didn't they have any other place?"

"Why not? plenty. But our village is ridden with politics, you know" he said.

I bought this magazine during my return journey. The very first piece was that Sindhi poem quoted at the beginning of this story. You may like to go back to it again. □

Translated by Amarendra Dasari

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SLUSH

Allam Rajaiah

ON the *mane* road, for approximately a half-kilometre, lorries had ground to a halt. Around the vehicles, here and there, pushcart vendors were selling *aamlates* and bread. The area was oozing and dripping with the slush. In the *chaai* hotels greasy lorry cleaners moved to and fro. A peculiar stench filled the air. In the cabins of the lorries, laid up in all sorts of awkward postures, dozed some of the drivers. With shouts, yells and obscenities, it was all one chaos.

The compound of the government hospital to the right of the road was filled with turbid water; frogs had set up a ceaseless chorus. The street lights burned dimly, feebly. In that mess people moved around like ghosts. Shouting. Eating. Drinking from the arrack (hooch) packets. "*Teri maa ka* nuisance, *arrey* Hussain, is the line cleared yet?" shouted a driver from one of the lorries, yawning. "No, *anna* (elder brother)!" shouted back a cleaner standing beside the lorry.

"Since the morning in this terrible weather it's been our death. Single road, so don't hire out the lorry on this line, you whoreson! I said but the owner fellow wont listen," said the driver opening the screechy door and climbing down.

On either side of that road stood big imposing cement buildings. The last one among the cement buildings was the government *davaakhana*. Adjacent to it went on many small businesses. In the bus-stand to the left of the *davaakhana* now only two people were left.

To one end of the chipped and broken cement bench sat a young man. Certainly not even twenty—but looked younger. A dark face—sparkling eyes—impatiently he sat there smoking *beedi* after *beedi*. Near his feet lay curled up a pariah dog which had no energy whatsoever left to move. Beneath the cement bench lay a bundle of rags gathered by some mad man. A little away stood two cardboard cartons packed in gunny. The boy stood up. He was feeling sick. The clothes on him stood loose, as though they did not belong to him.

On the same cement bench in the bus shelter, at the other end sat a woman in clothes soiled black, extremely filthy, as though she had been completely drenched in the rain, soaked in grief, a wild

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dove from the jungle lost in a storm. All around was such a milling but she sat there immobile as though she was in another world altogether. Though her face showed a tender age, it was already withered. A little infant, hardly one-week old lay in her arms. Obviously there were no clothes to cover the baby with; a soiled rag picked from somewhere covered it somewhat, haphazardly. The woman looked impoverished, pitiful. Her body looked like a village looted by bandits. To the destitute woman, struggling to survive somehow this infant was like a clog around her neck.

That young man and that young woman, sitting at either end of the cement bench since the morning had not exchanged a single word. Looking as though she had turned to stone, as though she had been drained of all vitality the woman sat there frozen. Not even moving her arms, except to nurse the infant. In the wet intermittent breeze, the drizzle that came down, in the tumult in which no one seemed to bother about anyone else, the young man had kept track of every change of feeling in her face. All that he noticed he was able to understand. But then when a solution evaded the woman herself how could it occur to him?

From the direction of the lorries came into the shelter, a couple of greasy cleaners; the stench of arrack swept the place. The young man was able to understand even this. The whole world floundered in the business of selling and buying. Helpless anger in his face, he got up and went and stood under the neem tree. With a peculiar noise, as though it was weeping with smouldering sorrows, the neem tree swayed its wet foliage.

He could not stand this kind of filth any more. His innards would twist and turn: because they were unable to stand this dirt. He himself—no, put away such memories, digging up the past, don't get buried in that soil. Whatever may happen but ... he must live like a fish swimming upstream.

"*Arrey baadkaav,* its nine, where are you lying dead?" a driver was shouting. Nearby an *aamlate* hissed and swelled on the pan. Next to this, a pig-like man was munching something noisily.

It would help if he could eat something now. He was trapped there. About ten kilometres away, thirty yards or so of the road had been washed away. They were packing it with sandbags, it was said. The 'clear' may come any minute now ... Even if the road is repaired by the time all those stranded lorries move away ...

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Not wishing to, he looked towards the bus shelter. The woman laid down the tiny tot in the filthy cloth the cleaner had given her. The duo and the woman merged in the darkness. The young man fumed. He felt like going and thrashing all three of them. Holding his head he sank down at the root of the neem tree. In his mind, a hut. When father, pulling a long face went out at dusk—in their home ... his mother ... shutting his mouth ... The young man's brain burned like a blacksmith's forge ... How evil life is! How agonising it is to go through that evil, that he had experienced it all was obvious. Was mother good? or was she bad? He hadn't understood yet. He pushed the thought aside. He tried to recollect the sound of rain on the palmyra leaves, which he loved so much. In the stream, trying to catch fish in the company of the father. "You don't keep all these things in your heart. A Telugu's life is a torn life. Do we have land or house plots? Even those with land and plots are becoming dust. We must live by catching *jimmalu* (fish) in the rainy season—go from door to door selling them. In the season of fruit, vegetables etc. we must sell them. If you want to live in this hamlet, you must learn the right way, like the little fish, and survive."

Unbearable hunger.

To chase away his thoughts he got up and went forward, entered a shack-restaurant and drank a hot cup of tea, eating up a bun with it. He remembered the day he had run away from his home. For some reason, his eyes filled with tears.

In the shack-restaurant he could not stand the obscenities and the stench of arrack. The young man went to the counter, and bought a glass tumbler and a bun. He took tea in the tumbler. Because he was near the hospital, it was usual for the restaurant man to sell glass tumblers.

When he reached the bus shelter, carrying the tea, the infant was crying, shivering wildly in the cold breeze. No one bothered about its crying. Putting the tea on the bench he took the infant into his arms. That kind of crying sounded so familiar to him. The baby was raw, like a lump of flesh. Feeling the warmth of the young man's arms the infant stopped crying. The young man could understand where the woman had gone. He felt sick in the pit of his stomach. In the folds of his mind something was melting.

When the young man raised his head, there stood a policeman and a homeguard.

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They kicked the two bundles lying there and the policeman demanded, "Are these bundles yours?"

"No."

"Then whose?" the homeguard asked.

"Was here until just now, *saar*. Said he would drink tea, come back and asked me to keep an eye, *saar*. Shall I go and look for him?"

"What are you waiting here for, *bey?*"

"Only today they asked my *akka* (elder sister) to leave the *davaakhana, saar!* No buses."

"Where is your *akka*?"

"Gone to drink water, just now, *saar.*"

Whatever they may have thought, they went their way. In a short while returned the woman, splashed with mud, hair all dishevelled. In the light of the lamp he could see she was shivering.

In the dim light, though, he could not make out what was there in her face. He put the infant down on the cement bench. Not bothering about it, even while the infant was wailing, the woman sat there inert like a sodden lump.

His hands shaking, the young man put down the tea glass and the bun beside her on the bench.

"Thoo, you also want it, you dog !" the woman said, in a voice which was hard to make out whether it carried grief or anger. In that voice echoed a curse on humanity.

"No, *akka.* Eat it."

Akka ... that word melted the lump of earth. Took the infant into her lap. Put her breast into her mouth. Like a famished dog gobbled up the bun.

Unable to stand the sight the youth went and stood under the neem tree. Shouts of the lorry men could be heard. In the semi-shadows of the lorries many similar to this woman were hovering. The cleaners were fingering them in all kinds of places. This world was new to the youth.

The breeze blew wet. In the distance somewhere frogs were croaking ceaselessly. An east-bound bus went past, splashing by the lorries.

The woman came carrying the infant and offered the glass back to the youth.

"Keep it there itself—I have bought it."

The woman went back.

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Stirred by the breeze raindrops started falling from the neem tree. The youth was forced to go back to the shelter and he sat down. He had seen the woman's face in the light. It looked like the face of a Gond *bai* (Gond woman).

"Which place, *akka*!" the youth asked her in the Gond dialect. The woman felt disturbed as though someone dear to her had spotted her ... She stirred uneasily for a while as though she was inclined to flee the place. But then she must have changed her mind.

"Whichever place, what is it to you?" Angrily.

The youth kept quiet. What is it to him? Can he wipe her tears? Quench or redress? Which place, does it matter which place? When all villages had been exterminated, what does it matter which village it is?

The woman too probably thought of such things. Or maybe thought of other things, but she said, "Our place is Guttalla" mentioning the name of her native place.

Perhaps he knew the place, the youth said, "What a fine place your village is. Hillocks all around—green trees—streams, birds, *bai.*"

The woman sighed. "Everything is there, but no food."

The youth neither agreed nor disagreed.

"The year before last it was drought in the summer. We could not go on feeding on sweet potatoes and grass seeds. We lay around, somehow trying hard to keep alive there, but the police fell on the hamlets, with abuses and blows. Not able to live there, we wanted to return after a rain or two and all of us in the hamlet came away this side. My father and my husband could not come here, they went into the jungle. Not knowing what to do, I came here."

As though possessed by a spirit, as though she had not been able to find anyone to talk to for the last three years, she wanted to say something more, but her voice choked completely. She began to sob bitterly.

"Then you haven't gone back home after that, *bai!* This year *porukala saarlu* (movement leaders) distributed one sack of jowar to each family!"

"Not satisfied, the devilish government fellows destroyed our huts." To stop herself from crying, the woman pressed her throat with her hands.

The youth did not ask more. Stories of those swept away by the mighty storm—and of those who withstood it, so many of them came

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to his mind.

The woman was still sobbing heart-brokenly, as though a wound of long ago had been opened now.

Meanwhile two passengers came out of the hospital gate. Of the two, the man was dressed like a *ryot* (peasant) in a half-sleeved tunic and a *dhoti*. The other, a woman, appeared to be his wife.

"Has the east-bound bus gone? What is the time now? The last bus is at ten."

The youth rose and went to find out the time. It was nine-thirty. When the youth returned, the *ryot's* wife also was crying.

"My innocent woman, dont weep! All those borne will they become fruit? All the blossoms, will they grow to be fruit? This is our fate. Stop crying! As it is you have just delivered. When I said that we should go home tomorrow, you didn't listen to me. If the doctor hadn't done that operation, would you have come out alive? There is no child for us, no matter, at least you have been left to us, and that is worth such a lot to us."

The *ryot* was consoling his wife.

His attempt to console her only made her cry more.

The cold breeze blew sharply. The infant in the arms of the Gond *bai* sitting to one end of the bench was crying breathlessly. Then, "The line is cleared," someone shouted in a worn out voice. Like a disturbed anthill, all the lorries started awake. In drunken voices drivers were calling their cleaners. Cleaners were shouting ahead for clearing their way. The lorry engines had set up a racket. The whole place, until then so dark, troublesome, oozing with mud, was now filled all of a sudden with the bustle and the illumination of the lorry headlights. People milled around clamorously. Starting awake, the youth barged into the line of lorries and struck a deal with one among them. Together, the lorry cleaner and the youth lifted the two bundles into the lorry cabin.

The lorry moved.

The youth sitting in the lorry then remembered the Gond *bai*.

If she was willing, it occurred to him in a flash, he should take her along with him.

With a word to the lorry driver, he climbed down from the lorry. Ran to the bus-shelter. There was no one there. He began searching anxiously. A bus came and stopped behind the lorry.

The *ryot* seen earlier had got into the bus and now stood inside.

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Two women were standing near the bus. The lights of the lorry blowing its horn behind the bus lit them up. Gond *bai* put the infant in the hands of the *ryot's* wife. The youth looked at the face of the Gond *bai*.

Tears streamed down her face.

The *ryot* standing in the bus searched all his pockets and took out a fifty rupee note.

The Gond *bai* ran away into the thick of the lorries as though someone was chasing her.

Recovering, the youth ran in the same direction. Among the hundreds of lorries, the Gond *bai* had vanished.

"*Arrey*, O! come fast" the driver was shouting. The bus and the lorries standing behind were honking furiously.

The youth came running back and climbed into the lorry.

The bus overtook them. The *ryot's* wife was carrying the infant, having covered her with her sari hem.

The lorry moved.

Was it real or was it a dream, it was all so confusing to the youth. Where is the end to all this? The question kept whirling in his head.

□

Translated by Ranga Rao

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A RAINY DAY

Peddibhotla Subbaramaiah

SIMHACHALAM sat staring at the rain coming down in waves on the distant hill, his chin resting on his hand. The cold wind was blowing fast and fierce. There was a pattering sound on the tin roof of the shop as if it were raining pebbles. Opposite to him, tall trees swaying this way and that, were being drenched in the rain. All the clouds in the sky gathered at one spot and thundered, as if all the fat elephants of a thick forest had congregated there. Once in a while, a streak of lightning tore the sky asunder, flashing across the clouds, like a dazzling line drawn across the heavens.

"Blast this rain," mumbled Simhachalam, irritated. Rain, rain, nothing but rain for the past five or six days. Rain all day and all night, with no let up. The hills and woods in the distance looked as if soaked in water. Water and slush everywhere.

Pulling his old muffler around his ears, Simhachalam widened his eyes and looked. In the distance along the slender tarmac, he could see a jeep coming. He got up and shook himself. His mouth felt bitter. He took out a peppermint from the bottom of a jar, put it in his mouth and stood under the eaves. Venkadu, the son of Guravaiah, of the opposite hut, was walking in that pouring rain with two or three salted fish and a small bottle of oil in hand, without a shirt to his back.

Whatever had happened to the jeep he saw on the tar road in the distance, it was invisible now. He wouldn't see it until after a while. "May be it's them ... " Simhachalam thought, and stood passing his hand over his unshaven chin. There was some noise inside the hut.

Just then came Bangarayya with a leaf for umbrella, and said "Give me *beedis*." He refused the pack of *beedis* offered with a shake of his head, and exclaimed, "What's this! you don't seem to be in this world ... Have I ever smoked these *beedis*?"

Simhachalam was apologetic: "Run out of your brand! Make do with these for now ... I'll get everything when this rain lets up ... All the tins empty .."

Bangarayya took the pack, took out a *beedi*, lit it and said, mockingly, "How will you go now? It is said that Midas-like Bania was undone by music ... Yea, I've heard ... heard everything, my dear fellow ... Anyway, how can you be blamed, when *Kali* is overwhelming our minds!" Simhachalam stood immobile like a statue. "Put it down

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in my account ..." said Bangarayya and walked away.

Simhachalam was furious. He stood biting his lip helplessly and peered into the distance along the road. The jeep came into view again. It sped along for a while and screeched to a halt before his shop. There were curtains on all sides to keep away the rain. Impossible to see who was inside. Just then somebody with heavy boots stepped out, opened his umbrella, walked to the shop splashing water, cursing, and asked, "Got Goldflake cigarettes?"

Simhachalam shook his head and said respectfully, "No, sir. Nothing but Charminar ... This cursed rain ... can't go anywhere ..."

The man turned towards the jeep and shouted, "Nothing but Charminar ... Shall I get them?" Somebody put his hand out of the jeep and made a sign to say "yes" and immediately pulled it inside. The first then turned to Simhachalam and said, "O.K. ... Four packets ... " and took out some money. Simhachalam gave him the cigarette packets, took the rupee note and gave him the change. The man dropped the coins in his coat-pocket, and again walked to the jeep splashing water and cursing. The jeep started as soon as he got in and was soon out of sight.

Simhachalam stood for a while, rubbing his hands together. Bangarayya's words came back to his mind. "Says ... he heard ... something ... This dummy ... this drunken ass!" he said to himself. Until very lately this fellow Bangarayya used to walk in his sleep. Used to be seen wandering around at night. One night, walking in his sleep, he had gone and stood before a bullock. His luck held, and his wife's wedding bond was strong, for Simhachalam was awake at the time. Simhachalam got up in a bound and got him out of harm's way. But for this, the bull would have gored Bangarayya to death.

Simhachalam took out a small note-book and entered the *beedi* pack against Bangarayya's name. For want of anything to do, he flipped through it, mentally noting who owed how much. Gurunadham ... a contractor's clerk ... owes ten rupees and odd. Ranga, coolie in a fertilizer factory, owes five ten ... Appalaswamy, watchman in a bungalow on the hill ... fifteen rupees. Potharaju ... a do-nothing who roams about while his wife picks dry twigs in the forest and sells them at the train and feeds the fellow ... eight twenty. And the fellow begs Simhachalam not to tell his wife. Subrahmanyam ... salary unknown .. doesn't smoke anything but Goldflake ... owes eighteen rupees.

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Simhachalam stopped turning the pages when he reached a certain page. He heaved a sigh. At the top of the page was written "Singaravelu" in ill-formed letters. Below that, the account ... then a line across. A total of three rupees and ten paise at the bottom.

It was as though he saw Singaravelu before him. The man was slim and tall like a wire. He was always going about with a smile on his face, with his lungi hitched up. He made people laugh, speaking in halting and out-landish Telugu. He sat on the bench there and chattered endlessly about Madras and the films there. Simhachalam woke up from his reverie and glanced sideways. Appalaswamy came walking in his patchy umbrella to the shelter of the hut, closed the umbrella gently, put it aside and sat down saying, "Simhachalam ... Looks like there's absolutely no customer?"

Simhachalam shook his head, sighed, and moaned, "What can I do ... this cursed rain ... Not a single item in stock."

"They say this is a cyclone. Heard the gents in the bungalow say so. No let up in sight, it seems," said Appalaswamy. He then stretched out his hand and said, "Well, let me have a pack of *beedis*."

Simhachalam got up, gave him the pack, took out the note book, and asked, "You already owe me fifteen rupees ... Badly need money ... When do you pay?"

Appalaswamy lit the *beedi*, put out the match and threw it away, all leisurely like a prince, and said, "yes, I'll pay, my dear fellow. Let the dough come ..." Then he peered inside, and said smiling oddly, "Anyway, why should you need money now? You've caught the golden bird. Her neck is all gold, I know. How far has the affair gone? But how crazy of me to expect you to tell me! It's just my foolishness." Then he fell silent.

Simhachalam's eyes grew red; anger flooded them. But he held it back and stood silent. Appalaswamy sat silent for a while smoking his *beedi* leisurely, then got up, shook his head-cloth and said as he wound it around his head again, "Tirapathy ... your father-in-law that is, is mad with anger, I happened to see Latchi also the other day ... crying day and night, I hear ... Father and daughter fly into a rage when they hear your name ... Still, I like you ... Must look after our interest first ... can't live in this world otherwise ... You've done a good thing ... go on .. go on ..." He opened his umbrella and went out.

Simhachalam stood staring, helpless and immobile like a doll.

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He paused for a minute and then rushed in as though chased. Inside, Periyanayaki was hanging a wet sari on a bamboo to dry. She heard footsteps and turned round. She had big, wide eyes. Her innocence was clearly visible in them ... wheat complexion ... A figure like a statue pains-takingly carved by a sculptor.

His doubt cleared, Simhachalam came back into his shop. He hadn't had a wink for the past five or six days, nor any peace of mind ... She was a stranger ... Didn't know our language ... Seemed to be capable of little else than looking out with wide, innocent eyes ... Had been sitting in a corner weeping silently these five or six days ... Simhachalam was watchful every minute ... A nagging doubt in his mind ... that she might at some unguarded moment, give him the slip and do something terrible. Just for this reason, he hadn't gone anywhere though the shop was empty. How little was required to take that breath! Just a hand's length of cloth or rope ... or there was the well in the backyard. If not that, a little kerosene and a match ... all of them within her reach ... That was why he spent the nights too without a wink of sleep. And if he had fallen asleep for a moment, he would wake up with a start and rush in to check. She used to lie sleeping on the floor, on the spread end of her sari. Even during the daytime when he made bold to leave her alone and went out to buy things, there was no escape from worry about her and the ornaments around her neck.

He sat on a bench, drew in his legs and counted on his fingers how long it had been since he had had that letter written giving all the details. However much delayed, it must have reached them by this time ... In fact, they must have started by now. But who knows whether the old gentleman in that bungalow had written the address correctly? For that matter, was the address given by her right or not?

At that moment Tirapathy came with unsteady steps, wet from the rain. He wiped his forehead and eyelashes and smiled peculiarly as he sat down. Simhachalam stood immobile, like one who knew not what to speak or do. Tirapathy was a man of forty. He appeared to be quite drunk and was unsteady. He turned a malevolent eye on Simhachalam and remained silent for a while. Then suddenly, "Ah, my fine son-in-law! Is she in there still?"

Simhachalam nodded his head and kept quiet.

Tirapathy taunted: "Here she will stay! Where else will she go? She's found the he-man ... And will she leave you now! All of us but

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you are just lumps of clay. You're the only wise guy around here! That's how it is."

Simhachalam approached Tirapathy and said, "Slander! Lies! That's what you've heard! Don't believe them. By my mother, there's nothing between us. That girl's in trouble. I had a card written and posted to her people. They will come and take her away. Believe me."

Tirapathy suddenly burst out laughing. He got up, held his sides, and was doubled up with laughter. Just as suddenly he assumed a serious posture and ranted, "Look here! I am fifty. Lost count of the lies I've heard with these ears! Teaching grandfather to suck eggs! You want to teach me, you cheat! Poor Latchi! She doesn't know you! Trusted you! And now everybody knows what you are! But you're lucky! You're among good people. At any other place, you would have been hunted like a mad dog ... Well, I'd better tell you now. Have no more hopes of her. We decided yesterday to marry her off to Koti."

Simhachalam was thunderstruck. He had never dreamt it would go this far. Not a word from him. He stood dumb-struck, like a statue.

Tirapathy got up with an air of triumph, then muttered, looking into the hut, "Hey; you! I don't know who you are! But you are a clever one ... you will be happy ... Take my life too and live!" Then he walked a few steps and said rhetorically, "This is the world, buddy! There are no fools here. There's God above, watching everywhere. Both she and you are destined to have a miserable life. Don't you forget that." He walked away, uttering imprecations.

All of a sudden he was overwhelmed by anger. This girl who sat crying herself out all day in his house had brought him ruin. She brought havoc in her train. He must throw her out. He walked with big strides into the house, his face red with anger. Periyanayaki—she seemed to remember something—was sitting in the backyard on the steps and weeping silently.

All his rage ebbed out. He felt pity for her. He walked to her, and standing nearby consoled her. "Do stop ... Will the dead one come back even if you cry your eyes out? ... Listen to me ... Pull yourself together."

How much she understood of what he said, he didn't know. But she wiped her eyes with the hem of her sari, stopped crying and remained staring at the distant hills and at the dense woods on the hills.

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There was the sound of someone's laughter in the frontyard. And he came out. Gurnadham stood there laughing, with a cloth over his head. He looked at Simhachalam and said, "Hey! give me a couple of cigarettes!" He took the cigarettes, but lingered there and said, "Oh! what rain! It's killing us! Don't know when it's going to clear up. Not a glimpse of the Sun God for the last five or six days. Haven't seen a storm like this in my life."

Then he paused for a while and went on: "But all this doesn't touch you. You look cheerful ... yes, I've heard everything ... Good thing you did, I say. You saved a girl in distress on the one hand, and secured a good thing in the bargain. Certainly ... you must think of both the present and the future ... whatever you do." Then once again he burst out laughing and went his way.

Simhachalam slumped down like one dazed. Then he drummed for a while on the wooden bench with nervous fingers. He got up, opened a bottle of soda water, gulped it, and lit a *beedi*. The smoke entered his unaccustomed windpipe and he began coughing. He checked himself, stretched his legs on to the bench, and shouted, like one drunk. "You ... you are not men! ... you are brutes! You dare to link my name with that girl's! Come ... one by one ... and I'll see your end! Come ... if you dare ... I'll fell you with a blow!"

Periyanayaki came out and looked around. There was nobody there. She couldn't guess who he was raging against, like that.

Meanwhile, he turned round, saw her and was abashed. He threw away the *beedi*, pulled himself together and began humming. He looked again after a few moments, and she was no longer there. He breathed deeply, and sat there with eyes shut.

Earlier, Singaravelu had recounted the details of his life and his troubles. May be it was three months since he had come here! Soon after coming he had found work in the fertilizer factory and set up in a hut. Those who had seen him and Periyanayaki together had thought they were husband and wife ... at first. Then—how they came to know, nobody knows—they started saying, "This Tamilian and his girl are a run-away couple!" Everybody came to know this. Singaravelu too heard these words, but paid no heed, and went about as always, his usual smiling self. He went further, and said one day to Simhachalam, "Yes, *thambi*, what they say is true!" He used the occasion to tell Simhachalam their whole story. He and Periyanayaki had loved each other since they were young. But after some years,

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there was some litigation between their families. And it took a long time to be decided. Finally one family won, the other lost. The feuds and hatred between their families only increased with this. Even a crow from this house could not fly to that. The children of one house could not play with those from the other house. And if they came across one another in the street, they pulled long faces and passed on. Now and then they taunted each other, taking care however, not to address each other directly. Meanwhile, her father had found a suitable match for Periyanayaki. She cried; she told her mother she would not agree. The mother rebuked the daughter and left it at that. Preparations for the wedding started. Periyanayaki could keep quiet no longer. She met Singaravelu on the sly and talked it out. He comforted her, saying every once in a while, "I love you ... I can't live without you." They sat together and thought about what was to be done. They debated and discussed, and finally came to a decision. Periyanayaki was to start on the night before the wedding and was to come to the Central Station, and Singaravelu would be there, ready with the tickets. It was decided that they would get into the train and give the elders the slip. Everything went off, as planned. First they came to Guntur. Somebody told them a fertilizer factory had come up here, and they came here. As soon as they came here, Singaravelu approached several people for a job and got this. Daily from dawn to dusk he toiled in that dirty, pungent atmosphere. He used to reach home, dog-tired, with a towel round his head, just as the sun was setting. But this didn't last long. His health was impaired. He couldn't get up for a whole week as he had a fever. After the fever was gone, he went, with weak steps, back to work, and was told that he had been dismissed. He came back dejected. But Periyanayaki put heart in him. "We'll sell the jewels I have, if it comes to that," she told him. But he paid no heed. He went out, toiled somewhere, and came home with a rupee or half. And on some days, not even that. Then they drank water to stifle hunger and kept quiet.

Simhachalam opened his eyes ... Kotamma stood before him, asking, "Got tobacco?"

He yawned, and said, "No."

She grumbled, "Well, well. No tobacco ... then why open the shop? Why not close the shop and snore inside? My man will break my bones if I don't take him tobacco ... what to do now?" Then she left.

It was raining steadily, as though the heavens had a hole. A small,

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colourful bird, drenched in the rain, came flying and landed on the fence, and was fluttering its wings. The distant hills could be only faintly glimpsed through this thick rain.

Once again he shut his eyes. What happened five or six days ago passed before his eyes once again.

That day Simhachalam got out of the train, came back home and set things in order. Very soon thick darkness enveloped the hills, the woods below, and all the world. He lit the hurricane lantern and hung it by a wire-hook. The card game by the fence, that had started before his departure in the morning, seemed to have just come to a close. The people threw the cards away and began gossiping. Simhachalam went there and took a look. Singaravelu was lying to a side, with a piece of cloth covering his face. In the middle of the room, there was a lamp. They were all talking of different things, some leaning against the wall, and some lying down. The talk turned to drinking, and to prohibition.

One said, as he lit a *beedi*, "You think drinking has come down after the coming of this law? If you ask me, I'd say it has gone up. Earlier, only the one who wanted to drink, used to. But now ... because it is prohibited, it has increased. Now everybody is having a drop ..."

"It was better ... earlier ... Now, ... a still in every house. How do you think, last year, Venkatesu's hut went up in flames? Only because there was hooch in it!"

"At least in those days you could get the real stuff if you shelled down the money. But now! ... no. People are drinking plain ammonia stuff. The good that the 'law' has done! ... What good?"

"Well, that's how it is. They drink anything for the sake of the kick ... Just go to the huts there and see ... You'll know. I'm told, that Jahar drinks spirit."

"That is addiction. If he can find nothing else at the moment, he will drink even kerosene."

"If he drinks kerosene, he will die without a squeak."

While the conversation was at this stage, Singaravelu got up with a start and burst out, "People die of drinking kerosene! Who says so?" as if challenging the statement.

"Yes, I said it myself. Why ... you can drink it?"

"Well ... I will drink a bottle of kerosene. How much do you bet?"

"Aha! Here is our hero ... O.K. I bet twentyfive rupees. Go ahead and drink."

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Singaravelu's eyes flashed with bravado. He raised his eyebrows, sat up, and said, with an air of determination "Well ... get it."

Meanwhile one of them raised the wick of the lamp. They gave money to somebody and sent him to get kerosene. The fellow went out and broadcast to all around what was in progress. Gradually people gathered there. It was all utter chaos. Everybody was speaking and nobody was listening to what others said.

All the people were standing around silently and eagerly. Singaravelu stood up, and drank the kerosene mouthful after mouthful. He drank the last mouthful, turned the bottle upside down, stood on shaky legs, and demanded, "Now, the money." He took the notes from the hand of his opponent, counted them slowly, leaning against the wall, and went home, leaving the crowd behind. The crowd talked about him for a long time, and decided he must be a champion-drinker.

That night dark thick clouds covered the sky like a blanket. There was a fierce, cold wind blowing from the ends of the world. The clouds suddenly began to empty themselves. For about half an hour, there was a heavy downpour.

Just as day was breaking, Simhachalam got up, came out clearing his eyes, and was struck dumb. People had gathered before Singaravelu's hut. One was slitting bamboos with a knife. Another was placing them in position between two long poles, and fastening them with rope. Under the narrow eaves they laid the corpse of Singaravelu. They covered it with cloth from top to toe. The Tamil girl Periyanayaki sat beside the corpse, and was sobbing, with the end of her sari thrust in her mouth. Simhachalam took it all in and shook from head to foot.

After that, everyone lent a hand and did what had to be done. Nothing was left undone. But that girl remained sobbing inaudibly in that hut. Towards midnight once again, as though nature had turned vengeful, it started raining again. The sky became a sieve. Just then it began to rain noisily with thunder and lightning. Somewhere there was the sound of a thunderbolt. And Periyanayaki came there running, shaking all over with terror. The rain that began like that had not let up so far.

Simhachalam suddenly opened his eyes. He got up, and paced up and down for a while, with his hands behind him. Then he wiped his face. Latchi came into his mind. Slender as a reed and always smiling. Her heart soft as butter. ... Fair in complexion! ... What life

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in her face! Simhachalam always forgot himself while she stood before him and chatted. Once, at an ill-judged moment, when he tried to take her hand, she sprang away like a young deer and went away with her finger on her sharp nose, saying, "No .. not yet." She walked away, turning back every now and then, smiling.

Simhachalam felt disheartened. Latchi would probably never look at him again! Didn't he know her persistence! Certainly he had lost her forever ... No doubt about it ... Simhachalam was startled, and got up. Two middle-aged people with umbrellas over their heads were standing before him. One of them spat out the betel leaf in his mouth and asked in Tamil, "Who is Simhachalam? ... tell me."

Simhachalam sprang up, and said, "Come sirs, come. I am Simhachalam. Your daughter is within. Come in." The two shut the umbrellas and came in.

Periyanayaki got up with a bound, crying 'Appa', and embraced her father. He too stood speechless for a long while, and stood there consoling her. Then all the three of them slumped there, wiping their eyes intermittently. Between sobs, Periyanayaki told them all that had happened. When he learned that the other man was Singaravelu's father, and that Singaravelu was his only son, Simhachalam was really moved. As the three began to talk to one another, Simhachalam remained there though he could not quite understand what they were saying. Then as he grasped that their conversation had turned to him, he came out and sat silently on the bench.

The rain now abated. But the cold wind continued to blow through the woods and over the hills. As the clouds thinned out, a dim moonlight spread. The two men then came out and praised Simhachalam in broken Telugu. He was a good man. If not for him, they would not have had even Periyanayaki. Periyanayaki had told them about the calumnies spread by the neighbours, and they told him not to take their words to heart. Like dogs barking at an elephant. And nothing was lost by that.

Simhachalam sat silent like a statue and listened to all that they said. When he turned round, he saw Periyanayaki standing there, her eyes full of gratitude.

In another hour they all got ready for the journey. Simhachalam closed his shop, locked the door and walked with them to the station. And all the time, as they walked, the two men went on thanking him every now and then.

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The train came within five minutes of their reaching the small station. The three got into the last bogie. As soon as the guard blew the whistle, the two men folded their hands in greeting and bade him good bye. Periyanayaki too folded her hands and said something, but it was lost in the roar of the train. He stood there for a while waving his hands.

Then all of a sudden he was overtaken by loneliness. He groped about in his pockets, unfolded and then refolded the sleeves of his shirt, and pushed back his hair. Then slowly he came out and got on to the road. The road was white, like a white python twisted around a hillock.

He walked a long distance and then stopped. Someone was laughing inside the hut. Latchi was laughing heartily. Wasn't the other voice that of Koti? He owed Simachalam two or three rupees. Tomorrow he would demand and collect it from him right before all the people.

He kicked violently at a stone that had struck his foot and walked on briskly. Suddenly he stopped and looked up into the sky. The sky which had been murky and disturbed all these days was now clear. The moon was shining like a huge pearl between two bits of cloud.

All of a sudden a whistle came from Simhachalam. Just like that. All this time he had thought he had lost a lot during these days of rain. Now he regained his poise. He walked back whistling all the way to his dwelling, in high spirits, pulled down the charpoy and slept on it like a log. His dreams were full of resplendent jewels and whole forests of sandal-wood. □

Translated by D. Lakshmana Rao

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THE GOLDEN BRACELET

Sriramana

WHEN I was six years old Baamma* was sixty.

My parents were all the time busy with their daily pujas, rituals, gods and our house used to be like a monastery, all the while crowded with swamijis and heads of religious *peethas*. There was a never-ending traffic of palanquins coming and going from our house. My mother was ever busy attending to their needs—cooking for them in a wet saree. Whenever I went to her she used to drive me away saying that I should not touch anything in the kitchen.

Baamma was never bothered about these things, she was a mother, father, relative, friend and everything to me. For her I was the ultimate Kasi and Kameswaram. We used to eat in one plate and sleep on one cot.

Baamma was alien to the nagging that is usually associated with the mothers-in-law and old people. If somebody says this old woman knows neither fear nor God she used to retort: "There is no virtue greater than kindness and no sin greater than unkindness. A tumbler-ful of water to the plant, a handful of grains to the birds, a fistful of grass to the cattle, a handful of rice for the hungry—this offering is all I know."

Baamma was given four or five acres of land by her parents. It used to be in a different village about ten miles from our village. Every year farmers used to come to pay the harvest money after the season. She used to welcome them very affectionately, ask them innumerable questions about her village and her people. Before they could answer one question they were beset with another. Question after question like a heavy downpour. Actually the farmers used to come with sad and gloomy faces—with a plan to tell her that the harvest was quite bad and would plan to give her meagre money. But she never used to give them a chance to execute their plan.

"You came in the hot sun. First wash your hands and come. I'll serve you food." She used to get busy in the kitchen. She used to

* Grandmother

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make them talk of all sorts of things relating to the village till they came to the last course. While they were eating curd rice she would suddenly ask. "How is the harvest this year?"

They used to feel a lump in their throat as big as a wood apple. After eating such delicious food served by her so affectionately, even before getting up from the plate how can anybody tell a blatant lie—say that the crops have failed? Naturally they would say, "The harvest was not bad Amma by God's grace."

Then there was nothing they could do but to pay her to the last paisa and leave. Before leaving they used to come to me and say, "Look here, little master, your grandma is real clever." She used to give me strong moral support whenever I refused to go to school. "He is only a child, when he grows up a little bit he would go on his own. However he is the only one in the family. He can live comfortably with whatever we have." She used to pick me up and walk out of the house.

As we cross the backyard there was a big badam tree in our house. That was our hideout. Three fourths of the day we used to spend our time there. The tree used to look like a green umbrella. Baamma used to make leaf-plates with the leaves of the tree. She used to eat only in those leaf plates. There used to be a mud platform around it. "I brought it from my parent's house, when I first came here after marriage. It used to be just the length of my hand and a little more. There were only three small leaves then." My Baamma used to tell me the same thing every day, patting the tree affectionately. "The age of the tree is thus equal to length of my married life." Even at that time she used to put a tumblerful of water to the huge tree. There were two huge holes in the trunk of the tree. In one two parrots used to live. Baamma used to keep snacks for me in the second hole. One of it's branches used to have a swing on it. One calf used to be tied to the tree. Baamma also used to feed tender grass to the calf. She used to collect all the badam fruits plucked out and dropped by the birds and open them with a special skill and give them to me. That tree used to give us shelter. It was our companion too.

My grandmother used to get up early in the morning and draw elaborate *kolams** on the front yard of the house with rice flour that was before anybody could get up in the village. The night before

*kolams : *rangolis*, designs made with flour

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while singing lullabie to me she used to draw designs in her mind. While she was doing it I used to hang on her back like a lizard and sleep comfortably. "As it is your back is bent with old age. Why do you want to carry this additional load?" My mother used to object to her carrying me like that. She used to brush it aside saying "How can you call him a load? I cannot draw at all if he is not on my back."

She used to sing the morning ragas waking up all the Gods while drawing these *kolams*. The song would go on as long as she continued, joining the four sides of the courtyard with her patterns. Our court yard used to look like an elderly married lady full of dignity and beauty. "If you don't sing and wake them up would not the Gods wakeup!" I used to ask her.

She would then say "They would never sleep at all. What would happen to the world if the Gods go to sleep?—The songs and the sweetened rice we give as an offering—they are all for us only."

Early in the morning she used to make me sit under the bitter-gourd creeper, massage my body with oil and give hot water bath. "The child is getting thinner and thinner. May be he is growing tall", she used to lament. Suddenly she would observe a small scar or a boil. "How did you get this?" She would ask and scold me for my naughtiness, she used to be very concerned. I used to enjoy this concern.

Every month a barber used to come to our house. Baamma used to get her head shaved and I used to get a haircut. It was always my turn first. "Be careful. He must look like a white Sahib. Do the haircut properly" she used to keep on giving suggestions and cautions. But the barber never used to pay any attention to her. After the haircut my hair used to look like the staircase of the Tirupati temple. When it was her turn she used to put her golden bracelet on my hand. After finishing the bath she used to wash her bracelet with the soap-nuts. It would be back on her hand and she used to admire it indulgently.

There was a restriction on my eating outside food, not because it would spoil my health, but it is supposed to be below our status to eat in a roadside shop. I never used to like all those restrictions.

Jaggery cakes made of sesame, sugar candies, all these and other snacks—I used to feel like eating all the time. I used to ask my grandmother. "Okay, let us go." She used to buy all these things, give me some and store the rest of the things in our secret hideout.

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When my parents came to know that Baamma is buying me all these things, they made special arrangements to see that she would not get any money. There were many quarrels in our house because of this. But she managed to see that I would not fall short of my regular supply. She used to bring rice from the house and barter it for snacks, from the street vendors. They came to know about this too. There appeared a big lock on the rice tin. My mouth was also locked effectively.

"You are the light of this house. You are an emperor here. How sad that you have to live like this." She felt sorry for me.

One day a vendor came selling sugar candy while I was in school. He used to come only on the days of the village fair. His trolly used to have a tin covering on all sides except one. That side used to have a glass cover. Through this one could see the puffed-up sugar candies—like full blossomed rose flowers. He used to shout "candy" in a very peculiar way knocking on the tin. That day, my mouth started watering as soon as I heard his call. I knew the temptation I felt and my grandmother knew too. His voice gradually started fading away. I was getting more and more distressed. Precisely at that moment Baamma appeared at the doorway. We were reciting the names of the Telugu years in order—Prabhava, Vibhava and so on—sixty in all. As we were saying 'Pramoduta'—she appeared on the doorway. There was a sudden silence. Our recitation stopped. Our master, Mr. Narasimham, was a hard task master. Children as well as parents were afraid of him. He used to sport a big moustache, spectacles and a clean shaven head with a tuft of hair at the back. He carried a cane-whip in his hand and had big bulging eyes. That was his appearance. My grandmother entered the room addressing him loudly in singular "Narasimha, send my grandson." I was ready with my slate and bag before he even looked at me, to give permission. "Go!" I was off as fast as a parrot.

The candy seller was standing at the end of the street. Baamma had already finished all the bargaining. She bought two pieces of sweet candy and some jaggery cakes made of sesame seeds. I ate the sugar candy there itself. My mouth became red like that of Hanuman, the monkey-god. "You cannot go to our house with this face." She took me round the village, till after the school hour was over. Then she took me home, but before that she washed my face and wiped it clean.

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Next morning my mother was frantically searching for the little brass bell that she kept in the *pooja* room.

"Where would it go? Rats must have taken it away." Baamma was trying to divert her and pacify her.

"What would the rats do with the bell?" I asked her. "They would tie it to the cat, you little fool, shut up" she dragged me out of the house.

The sweets we kept in the treehole were over within two days. Next week it was again the day of the village fair. There was a big cyclone in our house in the form of a quarrel on that day. Early that morning my father was shouting at the top of his voice. Baamma was standing like a criminal in front of him. The sugar candy man was standing in the front porch. The brass bell was given to him the previous week by my grandmother in exchange for sweets she purchased from him. He was yet to give some more. He came that day to give the rest of them. That was the problem that rocked the house. The bell she thought would not make any noise, rang loud and clear in her heart.

"She was not even afraid that she was stealing the bell from the abode of the Gods." My mother accused her.

"Why should I be afraid? However where can you find God—in the brass bell or in the little bellies of innocent children?" retorted my grandmother.

"Enough of these pious thoughts ... If we now keep quiet both of you would even sell that golden bracelet to buy sweets" my mother hinted to my father.

Before my father could say anything Baamma walked out of the house mumbling something to herself, in an angry tone. She sat under the badam tree, I followed her meekly and stood a little away from her.

"*Chi, Chi,* this is all because of you. See, I have to resort to stealing now at the fag end of my life. Get away from me. Don't come anywhere near me. You have your father and mother. Go to them. Anything in life ... If you think it is yours, all sorts of problems would come. If only I can say nothing is mine—there is so much of comfort in it." She started crying uncontrollably. The dry badam leaves received her tears with a rustle. That sound was like a thunder to my ears. How would one feel if Gods start crying?—that too orphans like me. I too started crying. Suddenly she pulled me into her lap. Slowly she fell asleep there on those dried leaves. I sat by her side exactly as she

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would sit by my side patting my back. She suddenly sat up as two badam fruits fell on her shaven head. I started laughing. When she understood the joke she also started laughing. All my courage came back.

She started opening the badam from inside the fruit. "Your mother has been planning to take this bracelet and get new bangles made. See, how she now twisted the matter to suit her purpose." "Yes, yes" I nodded my head sagely though I did not understand—just to please her.

Dassera days had come again. We were visited by one *peetham* with all the paraphernelia. The head swamy, his disciples, servants, cooks, a baby elephant, four cows, one deer, one palanquin, and innumerable bags and baggages descended on us on one fine morning in four carts.

Within minutes they occupied the whole house and started arranging their belongings as if they own the place, while Baamma and I stood watching the whole show like strangers.

The language they spoke also is very peculiar. It is all full of classical overtones. Baamma dismissed the whole thing as a big show off.

The baby elephant had to be fed everyday with a basket of jaggery and a whole big bunch of bananas. There were two mahouts exclusively to look after it. Baamma tried her best to persuade him to allow me to sit on it, but she could not succeed. The palanquin was covered with satin cloth and it was kept inside the house. I repeatedly asked them to allow me to sit in it. "Why do you bother about that stupid palanquin? I will get another one decorated with gold beeds—It would be thousand times better than this one, for your marriage. You can go around the village in a grand procession." After everybody had gone to sleep she once put me for a while on the deerskin of the swamiji. It was soft and funny, I even tried to play with the deer. But my grandmother considered it a member of the enemy camp and forbade me to play with it.

There were incessant prayers, meditations and, *havan* in our house every day. It was full of devotees and relatives who had come to attend the function.

The swamiji used to sit on silver coated throne. He was always busy counting the beads of his Rudraksha. Most of the time he was reserved and silent. Occasionally he used to smile at his devotees. He

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used to have a say in all matters going on around him—religious as well material. He used to be the one to give instructions to the cooks on what to cook and how to cook every day.

They used to take it as his command. Devotees used to go and beg him to give his feet for them to do their *pranam*. Otherwise they used to pay their homage to his chappals.

After he had taken his meal he used to relax on a big wooden swing. It used to have silver chains. People used to always vie for a chance to fan him with hand fans.

"Living in luxury means—one should first think of King George and then comes your swamiji", my grand mother used to tease the followers.

There were lectures on Vedanta in the evenings. People used to attentively hear him whether they followed him or not. They used to give him shawls, silk sarees, fruits and cash—for him and for the Goddess.

One day a gentleman came to visit him, he wore a silk kurta. He had four gold rings on all his four fingers, a gold chain with a large pendant around his neck. He came in a horse-drawn carriage. As soon as he came he knelt at the feet of the swamiji. He received him very affectionately and enquired after his business. He took his hands into his own. "Okay, by your grace" he replied.

"Rahu is now changing his place. Now you are very safe. Whatever you touch would turn into gold." The swamy assured him leaving his hands, at last. The gold ring on one of his fingers switched over to the hands of the swamy. He gave it to the disciple beside him and told him "Get a golden nose-ring to our Goddess." The devotee was visibly upset as if his finger had been cut. His lips dried, "Whatever you say, Swamy," he mumbled after a long time. "No, it is mother's order", he curtly replied. He went on with his lecture on thought, word and deed.

Baamma had to leave the place because she could not control her laughter "Whatever your swamiji touches would turn into gold" she remarked jokingly to one of the disciples.

Last time when he came his eyes fell on her bracelets. He told her "If you give it to me I would get a gold chain for the Goddess." She immediately replied "How can I ever give her anything? She is Goddess Lakshmi. Why does she need the bracelet of a humble person like me?" Thus she cleverly escaped.

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"Is he trying to teach hopping to Lord Hanuman! If I want to give it away I would have given it to Gandhiji when he was collecting donations for his Swaraj. When I did not give it to such a great man why would I give to this circus man?"

It was time to distribute *prasadam* to all the devotees. They had all lined up to get their share and to pay their respects. I also went there to get it and extended my hand. Swamiji looked at me ferociously and told me to get out. One should not go there with shirt on, I believe.

Everybody started making lots of noises as if a great crime was committed. Somebody had taken off all my clothes and made me stand naked before him. Even then he did not forgive. He told them to take me out. My mother went and stood before him seeking forgiveness. He grew angrier and declared there would be no distribution of *prasadam* that day as a penance for the mistake committed and closed the shop by going into meditation.

All the devotees and disciples looked at me as they would at a criminal. My father too lost his patience, he took me away and beat me mercilessly. There were big burning wounds on my body. I ran away crying loudly. My grandmother came running with both her hands outstretched. She took me into her lap, close to her heart. Tears of pain, anger and loneliness flooded out of my eyes. My grandmother appeared like a saving angel who had come with thousand hands outstretched to protect me. She took me to the badam tree. On looking at my wounds she could not control herself. She patted my body and covered me with her saree "How could he beat you like this? Stupid fellow." She went on questioning herself and chiding my father. I stopped crying but she continued to be angry.

In the meanwhile, the main follower of the swamy came there to dry his clothes. "Deekshitulu, come here" Baamma called him. He was shocked at the way she addressed him. He was closest to the swamy and well revered person in the camp. He was regarded as second in command to the swamy, as he knows all his likes, dislikes and moods. If swamy gets a cold, Deekshitulu starts sneezing. That was their relationship. Now he walked towards my grandmother—a little diffidently.

"What kind of swamy is this man? Look at this child and how he was beaten. Does he become an untouchable simply because he had a small shirt on his body? There are so many in your gang who

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are absolutely dirty. Let him skin them like this and give holy water to them. One cannot achieve anything just by reciting Upanishads and Gita. Can anyone get strength just by measuring the corn? One has to pound, cook, eat and digest it in order to get the essence. Go and tell your guruji that I said so, I am not afraid of him. I am immune to his anger or curse." Deekshitulu's head reeled at this onslaught. He slipped away slyly from there. Even then my grandmother's anger did not subside. She went on grumbling, "What does he think of himself—with those bulging eyes? Is he a Vemuri Gaggayya? He cannot throw a Brahmastra on a sparrow. Hectares of land is being wasted on these fellows. A person who cannot conquer his temptation for sweets, seeks to conquer the six evils—desire, anger, lust, ambition and so on." She went on and on for a half an hour shouting at every body, my father, the swamy and his disciples.

That night my mother took me into her lap, and started crying. My father could not eat food, throughout the day. "You should have better control over yourself earlier. By fasting now can you cure his wounds? You should not have shown such short temper," my grandmother told him.

From then onwards she turned against everyone in the *peetham.* She went into the kitchen and demanded vadas from the cook authoritatively and gave them to me. She called Deekshitulu and told him, "Look here, I brought these *vadas* before they were offered to Gods. You can go and tell your swamy. To give a tumblerful of water to the plant, handful of grains to the birds, fistful of grass to the calf, and stomach full of food to the hungry—these are my four Brahmasutras", she challenged him. Deekshitulu by then was literally scared of her. None can say when she would call and what tirade she would unlease.

On the evening of the second day the swamy called me and took me into his lap while speaking at his evening gathering. He also gave me one guava and told me to eat the whole fruit. I felt as if I was sitting on the lap of a tiger. His beads started pressing into me. I could not move because of fear. Then he gave me his wooden chappals I tried walking with those chappals "your grandson is a little Krishna," he laughed aloud. Everybody was smiling. "It was all his luck and your affection" said my grandmother. Deekshitulu was greatly relieved.

My grandmother continued to sing and draw designs on the

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front porch with rice flour. But my childhood slipped away from her back. Now I eat in my own plate and sleep in my own bed. I came now to high school. They had decided to perform my thread ceremony.

The hangama started one week earlier. The house was full of friends and relatives. My maternal aunt, uncle and their daughter had all come. Kalyani was about ten years old then, people started referring to her as my future wife.

My aunt exclaimed as soon as she saw her mother "Why, mummy, you have gone down quite a bit."

"No, no don't worry about me. I would not get into anybody's trap" replied my grandmother. "Look at your hands. They are very thin. While drawing water from the well you should be careful, your bracelet might fall into the well," she cautioned. "You may give any number of cautions but I would not give this to you" Baamma said again.

"What do you mean? Do you think I am dying for your stupid bracelet." Aunty got very angry.

"Stupid bracelet? Remember this is gold."

"I am your one and only daughter—Your own daughter. And you do not have any affection for me." She started crying "I never cried for your alms so far."

This argument made my mother inwardly happy. My father meanwhile interfered and diverted them both.

My thread ceremony took place as planned. My father taught me the Brahma Mantra in my ear, I had thus acquired a thread on my neck and gold rings on my ears.

The badam tree had dropped the yellow leaves, and acquired new green leaves. The old parrots had gone and given place to new ones. The calf that grandmother got as a wedding gift had given birth to another calf—this was the fifth child.

Though she lost her eyesight considerably she kept on drawing patterns out of habit. The heads of *peethas* and swamijis are now not coming as regularly as they were earlier. The fields we had inherited from our forefathers had now reduced considerably. The mango-grove is no longer the property of our family head. The big house we used to have had now got only walls all round and not a roof over it. But my grandmother's tongue was as sharp as ever. She always used to remark wittily that the silver chains of our swing were

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eaten away by the baby elephant.

My mother had become old quite early in life. She need not cook now in wet sarees. My father had become very detached. Though we were not living in the grand way we used to earlier, we were not living in poverty either. The only grand things that mattered to me were the badam tree and my grandmother. They were still there. "If you feel a sense of ownership at any time it will only result in sorrow. If you can develop detachment and think that nothing is yours, it will fetch you immense peace." My grandmother's dictum was proving to be true.

I finished my F.A. and I also got a government job in Machilipatnam. I started getting marriage proposals. My maternal aunt's daughter Kalyani was also proposed to me. But my grandmother opposed it vehemently.

"Her name is Kalyani. But she is just a snail in her shell. Her mother is a cunning devil. You cannot be happy with her. Better marry some girl outside the family." She told me clearly. My aunt also was not over anxious to give her daughter and keep the ties stronger. They also had only one daughter. They were relatively richer than us. I am not even a qualified lawyer.

We considered two or three matches out of which the one suggested by our school teacher Narasimham was acceptable to all of us. Baamma liked it very much. It was almost finalised, but at the last moment there was a dispute on the demand of four sovereigns of gold that the girl should be given.

Narasimham tried to mediate but in vain. It became a prestige issue between the two families.

The girl was very sober and fair like a memsahib. Her eyes were especially beautiful. "The four sovereigns of gold are equivalent to one kiss" my grandmother tried to tempt me. Though in their heart of hearts they were not willing to relent, outwardly my parents left it to my choice. I could not decide either way. My grandmother took me to the badam tree and tried to convince me of the advantages.

"The girl's name is Gayatri."

"So."

"As it is the name of Goddess, even if you call her ten times in a day you would earn some goodwill in the upper world and in here too. And again she comes from a big family."

"So what?"

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"She would understand the pleasures and hardships of life better. You know, it seems she is an expert at making the curry with banana stem. She can also draw huge designs on the floor."

"So what?"

"You stupid goose, one needs a lot of patience to cut the banana stem finely to acquire proficiency in making it. And also to make *rangolis* too one needs patience more than skill. She can recite the whole of Rukmini Kalyanam. She can also explain the word to word meaning."

"So what ...?" I persisted.

"So what you say, that means she can do anything for the sake of the man she loves. If you keep on counting the minutes to decide, she would come on her own and snatch you away," she tried to provoke me into action.

I was not convinced that I should defy my parents for these arguments. Next day I had to leave for Machilipatnam. I went and stood before my father silently. I hesitated to say any thing. "You can decide in whatever way you like. I cannot impose my likes and dislikes on you as I know I cannot demand obedience from you. After all I have not given you any property too. How can I demand from you? Only thing is if you decide to marry her just let us know so that we can perform the marriage."

That was how it was decided. I could not sleep that night. In the middle of the night Baamma came to my room groping for me. "I am awake. Tell me what is it", I said. "I knew you would not be able to sleep," she said.

"Look, your father is more sentimental than practical. Your mother obeys him blindly. She does whatever he says. His word is Veda for her. All these issues would be there only four or five days. Later, all these things would be forgotten. You will have this gem of a girl for life. Tell your father that you will marry no one else before you go." I did not reply, just turned to the other side on the bed.

"Look, I crossed eighty years. I want to see your marriage before I die. The *alta* she applied on her feet should make your legs red and the *paan* you have taken should make her lips red. Then you will have a small baby in your house. Don't you want me to come to your house then." Hot tears fell on my chest.

I reached Machilipatnam and wrote to my father to settle this match for me. But before I posted it I received a telegram saying

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that everything is fixed and I should proceed on leave to get married.

"They have come down." Baamma said as soon as I entered the house, "How can they ever leave a son-in law like you? They stood on prestige for a while. Theirs is also a big family."

"You did not listen to me when I told you one kiss can write off four sovereign of gold. It is all due to our Narasimham. He used his good offices to finally settle this," she was very happy.

My parents were also happy as they could get what they wanted all along. I was happy as I could marry the one I wanted without offending anybody's sentiments. "Thanks God" I said to myself, as my boss would often say.

The marriage took place without any problem. My Baamma watched our marriage as if her whole body has only eyes and nothing else. "Do you remember, you wanted to sit in the swamiji's palanquin when you were a child. I promised you, I would get you one better than that for your marriage. Now I have fulfilled my promise. Enjoy your ride and let everyone feel jealous of you."

Next day it seems she asked my wife "How do you like my grandson?" Gayatri then replied, I believe "Your grandson owes me three sixty sovereigns of gold. I don't know how he would be able to pay it." My grandmother was initially shocked, but burst out laughing later at her cleverness.

We set up our family and entered the *rangoli* as she would say. It was a one room tenement. But our newly married life was like a palanquin ride: just like Baamma's blessings.

We understood what she meant when she said her *alta* would redden my legs and my *paan* would redden her lips. We lived her blessings completely and literally. I asked her to come and live with us. "This is my land and my village. I must die here. Your mother is a great lady. I will be comfortable here. Don't worry about me," she said.

We visited her when she was on her death bed. There was no clarity in her speech. She asked us "Is your new life happy?" We nodded affirmation. "Family life and a vegetable cutter would sharpen only after repeated use." We laughed at that. Her face brightened. She took our hands into hers, "Remember—a tumblerful of water to the plants, handful of grains to the birds, and food to the needy—I enjoyed the fruits of my good deeds. My life was very smooth and happy. Now or after a short while ... That's all, I would go," I started

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crying at her words.

"You stupid fellow. Where would I go ... I will just go for a while, stroll around and come back to your house." She told me and breathed her last.

There was an unbearable vacuum inside me. She was a father, mother, friend, relative, God and kindness everything to me. I felt very lonely.

I went round the badam tree like a mad cap. That seventy year old log of wood wouldn't know of Baamma's death. Who would water her from tomorrow? The parrots in its hold were also not aware of her death. Who would give them grains from tomorrow? I scrached in the other hole and found lot of badam fruits inside—who would collect them from tomorrow?

I can never get out of the memories of those days. My life lies intertwined with that badam tree. My childhood was alive even then under its shade. All the obsequies were over. My grandmother's bracelet was taken to the gold smith for weighing. We came to know that it was spurious gold. My father, mother and aunt were all puzzled.

They did not know that she got it melted to get me the bride of my choice. I also would not have known but for Narasimham master who had acted as the mediator—who told me the secret.

She will again come to my house. I will give her golden bracelet back to her. I swear on my Gayatri. □

Translated by Syamala Kallury

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PANKAJAM'S DREAM

R.S. Sudarshanam

THE intermittent rickshaw-bell. The lone wail of a bitch.

In the indistinct light of the zero bulb, Pankajam lay moaning. Her eyes were tightly closed and there was an expression of pain on her face. Lokamma shook her to wake her up. She felt her under the chin and declared: "Fever is gone! You were talking in sleep, you know! Dreaming?"

"Thirsty ... water" said Pankajam.

"You are drenched with perspiration. No water, have some gruel."

"I hate it. It makes me sick."

"You have to take something, you know; something to keep you going. I left a glassful here a long while ago. Hoped you'd have it as soon as you woke up. But you continued to sleep ... Let me see. Oh, it's gone cold ..." Lokamma handed the glass to Pankajam.

Sitting up on the bed and taking the glass, Pankajam inquired, "What might be the time now?"

"About half-past ten."

Pankajam sipped the gruel and with an effort of the will swallowed two gulps, and returned the glass to Lokamma unable to go on with it. "You didn't have any clients tonight?" asked Pankajam.

"Oh yes, he left me soon. Some college boy, I guess. New and nervous. Got rid of him, quick and easy," Lokamma said with a chuckle.

"Sit here" Pankajam invited her to sit by her. Lokamma obliged.

"A terrible dream I was going through. If you hadn't come and called me back to this world, I don't know how long I'd have been hanging, you know, hanging like that ... You see I dreamt I was dead and then taken to *yama loka*."

"Silly girl! Would this fever kill you? What nonsense! Take my word you will be fit and ready in just three days time!"

"That isn't it, Lokam! I really long for death sometimes. I am not afraid to die. But then I'll have to face Yama's torture. Considering

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that, perhaps, it is better I somehow manage here."

"What is your complaint now? There is no Yama and no *yama loka*, so stop worrying."

"How do you say that? Didn't you see him, the lorry-driver Venkayya, who brought me here? Yama looking at me with the same blood-shot eyes was just like that fellow. Of course he had thick black whiskers; and a shining, burning *gada* (club) in his hand; and on his head a gold coronet. I shudder to think of his eyes, so red like burning coals. He asked me: "Why did you keep sinning, woman, why?"

Lokamma started laughing. "Sin and merit? You mean you were seeing the film 'Savitri' again in your dream! That wonderful *yama loka* scene, you know—"

"May be it's the cinema, may be it's real. I was shaking with fright. That was for real. All the time my brain worked, worked for a plan, a plan of escape ... and I kept arguing with Yama as best as I could: 'I am not to be blamed, Lord! My mother married me to an old fogey. She couldn't afford to pay a proper dowry to get me a young husband. And the old fellow took the life out of me treating me like a slave. So I ran away with lorry-driver. Venkayya, who made promises, who made me believe in him and finally betrayed me. What about punishing him? Throw him in Hell. As for me, well, I had no other way to live! Would Waheeda Begum feed me for nothing? I had to earn and live. And there were so many in the profession! Six women in my place and daily there were clients. You must punish them, why me? Rickshaw-wallahs, taxi-wallahs, Waheeda Begum, Hussain, Rangayya—all of them had to depend on our earnings ... after deductions, and payment for food, we got a mere rupee per client, and a rupee more when we danced. Why blame me, what may be my fault in all this?' I made out a full case, you see ..."

"Let that be" said Lokamma with unconcealed boredom. "I wanted to ask you a favour. How much money do you have in your account now."

"Not much. Last month's earnings went towards the cost of the new saris. This month out of the sixteen rupees I have been able to earn, ten are already spent for the doctor's bill. The balance is just six rupees. Why what has happened to your earnings? Why are you asking me."

"I have ten rupees in my account. I have managed to make two rupees tonight. I touched his pocket you know, and he yielded grace-

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fully. I want just three rupees more to buy me a new sari, just like the one you have. It's so nice ..."

"All right, you may have it from Waheeda from my account."

"Thank you. I knew you wouldn't say no to me." Lokamma took Pankajam's hand in hers and pressed it gently.

"After that, you know what Yama said in reply?"

"Oh, yes, yes?"

"What you have told me doesn't help you. Every siner gets his or her punishment. None shall escape the law.' And no sooner did he say this, than one of his men was already dragging me away by my hand. 'Ah, wait a bit.' An idea came to me. 'My knee is giving me awful pain.' I then fell in a heap refusing to move. 'I have seen lots of folks like you, get up and get going', he said and lifted me on to his shoulder and started moving at great speed. I thought it was not altogether a bad thing and clung round his neck, pressing myself against him softly and gently. I even gave him a kiss on the cheek hoping he might soften towards me. But no use, he took me to an open well of boiling oil and wanted to drop me into it. I tightened my grip round his neck and would not come off. He must have felt short of breath or something. He started shouting: 'Give up, give up.' I didn't and was hanging on desperately ... How long? How long? ... But you came, woke me up and saved me in time ... I never gave up, you know!"

Lokamma laughed aloud.

Pankajam didn't laugh. She closed her eyes feeling tired after her long narration.

Lokamma said : "You feel sleepy. That's right. Go to sleep. I am leaving." She stood.

"No, no ... please stay. If I sleep, I may dream again I am afraid to sleep now. Please stay for a while, wont you?"

Lokamma sat down. A few minutes passed. Pankajam opened her eyes, and inquired: "Are you feeding my bitch daily?"

"Sure. Would it leave me, if I didn't? It waits there till eternity. You have made it quite a regular thing. I can't imagine where it disappears in day-time, but in the evening, it is very punctual for the meal. A street-bitch, what is the use of feeding it every day? Will it keep watch, or be of any other use?"

"That's the only good act I perform. In my childhood my mother used to tell me a story of the Pandavas. They were on their last

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journey towards heaven, and all fell to the ground except Dharmaraj the eldest, who alone deserved to go on the heavenly chariot with his earthly body; and with him was left a black dog. And if I go to *yama loka*, I think I'll have my street-bitch following me."

"What sort of silly fear is this Pankajam, all because of a few days fever! If we are to think of this profession as sin, what else do we do for a living? We have to go on with this till we have our chance to go into the cinema, and once we get that chance, we start earning enough to get married, and then gather religious merit too."

"I no more believe it! Lorry-driver Venkayya brought me here just on that hope. But where are the film-people? Did he really know any of them? Deceit, deceit, nothing else! He got a big price from Waheeda. He sold me to her. She said she would train me as a dancer, and on that pretext, put me in the trade. I had no other go but to accept. It's already three years since I came here. Do you still think that film-people will really come for you or me? No, no, this is our life and must go on till we die."

"They will come! We had three men the other day, you remember, they were from the film-company."

Pankajam made a sound with her lips indicating disbelief. She said: "That rascal Venkayya didn't feel even as much as my street-bitch feels for me. Six months ago he came here fully drunk and beat me ... for nothing! What cause did I give? None. And the blow I got on my knee, it still troubles; while I walk suddenly the pain appears. I have seen the last of that fellow. I have begged of Waheeda not to allow that fellow to meet me any more. The hope of films, I know, is no hope, it is empty nothing ..." Pankajam burst into tears.

"What is wrong with your life now? Who on earth is not sinful? All those respectable people, the moneyed ones, aren't they coming here to be with us? If one is clever enough, one must catch hold of a money-bag. Then one could move out of this place. And live comfortably and happily ever after ..." said Lokamma.

Pankajam remembered suddenly. There was just a ray of hope, a silver lining in the cloud, but one couldn't be sure. She wondered whether it would be wise to share her secret with Lokamma. Lokamma might become an obstacle. But she needed Lokamma's advice badly. She wanted to know her opinion about it. Perhaps the matter could be safely put as a general proposition, as a possibility.

"Catching hold of a money-bag? You mean marriage?" queried

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Pankajam.

"Or some safe legal arrangement."

"I suppose that can come only later. How is one to know the right man, who can be trusted to do that?"

"No question of trusting. First settlement and then the next step into the future."

"Suppose property settlement is not forthcoming, but he keeps you as his own. Suppose he is not a money-bag, but an officer or something."

"Those are no good at all. They want pleasure without payment. Each visit here costs a minimum of fifteen rupees. So if he takes you out of this place, it works out cheaper over a period, till he gets tired of you. One should never trust that type."

Pankajam fell silent. She closed her eyes. Lokamma yawned. She said: "I'm sleeply, I'll go now. I'll take those three rupees from Waheeda in the morning. Good night."

Pankajam didn't get to sleep immediately. With eyes closed, she was recalling something that happened six weeks ago. The whole scene. Tall and handsome, the young man had something special about him. As four of them including herself stood before him, he didn't even take a good look. Impulsively, as though it mattered in the least, he nodded towards Lokamma first, but suddenly changed his mind and said: "Not you ... you" pointing to Pankajam, who stood next to Lokamma. The choice was made and the other three went away. She could judge from his manner that this was his first visit to a place like this. She felt bored and indifferent. He asked something and she gave a reply not even caring to understand his question. She asked him straightway without hesitation: "Wont you give me some present, please!" She didn't want to lose the opportunity an inexperienced visitor presented. He handed his purse to her! There was fifty in all. How much could she take safely? For, if she took more than he would be pleased to part with, the matter might go to Waheeda, who frowned on such things. It was against the rules of the house. "It is for you to make a present" she told him. He took out a fiver. She regretted that she hadn't taken at least twenty chips, when the purse was in her hands.

He held her face in the palms of his hands, and bent over her looking deeply into her eyes. His fingers moved gently along her cheeks. She felt strange at this tenderness and avoided his look turning

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her eyes to the electric bulb. His lips closed against her right cheek and pressed against it. His deep breathing caused a queer sensation. "What is all this acting!" she asked herself. Is he from the film-folk: A Director?

She asked: "Do you belong to the filmworld?"

"Why do you think so?'

"Just a guess."

There was a pause.

"I'm an officer" he said.

"Police Officer?"

But a Police Officer wont come like this. He would order the girls to go to his place!

He smiled and said: "An Engineer, in charge of constructions."

No matter who he was, she had certainly lost an opportunity of making some more money. "But why is he so slow, why doesn't he come to the point?" she kept wondering while the insects gyrated round the electric bulb. She was totally indifferent.

"Why are you so quiet? Why don't you say something? ... Shall I go away?" he said suddenly. This struck her as funny, his threat that he would go away! Let him go. Who cared as long as he paid up. She didn't reply. It might be impertinence, and Waheeda advised silence to all kinds of queries from visitors. Putting forth a smile with effort, she said: "What is your pleasure? You are free to command me, Sir!"

"Tell me about yourself. Why and how did you come to be in this place?"

What a nuisance, what a bore!

"I have always been here, Sir. I don't come from anywhere in particular."

"Look, there are tears gleaming in your eyes. You are not answering me. Allright, you needn't tell me. Where is the end of your sari? This is it ..." He uncovered her breast.

There were no tears though. The mention of tears by him had a strange effect on her. She remembered her dead mother suddenly; remembered her difficulties in the last five years. But nothing could make her shed tears, no, she had a stone for a heart; her courage and fortitude were great. She was proud, and what did the stranger know about her?

For all his strange approach, the man did not fail to prove his

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manliness, his manhood, and he did share his pleasure with her. While doing so he succeeded in drawing tears from her, grateful tears, for an experience she had seldom had. She melted and found herself telling him her story, every little detail of it. This angel of a man, she wondered, why was he frequenting filthy streets and sinful houses!

"Haven't you got a wife?" she asked him.

"Yes and no. She has gone away. She left me for another man."

"Why? What for? Is the other man more handsome or rich?"

He nodded in reply. He might have meant that was so, or he might not have relished the question. She didn't press for an answer.

"Then why don't you marry again?"

He smiled, took her hand in his and pressed it.

"Are you healthy?" he asked.

What a question to ask, after everything was over!

"Once a week the doctor comes here, that is Waheeda's arrangement. No doubts on that account."

He laughed and said: "What will your Begum charge, if I choose to visit daily?"

"You have to ask her. But would you?"

"No, I wont. Will you come away with me?"

"Impossible."

He tried to persuade her. "I'll make you happy in every way, short of formal marriage."

She couldn't trust him.

"I'll be back here in two months. Take your time to decide and let me know then." He asked for her name while leaving.

Pankajam didn't mention this to anyone. If Lokamma heard it, she would be sure to inform Waheeda. There was nobody she could trust or confide in. Each one to herself. Lokamma might be a friend. It was impossible to know when she would change and do something adverse. What did she do in the matter of the street-bitch? It was she, Lokamma who informed Waheeda that a street-bitch was being fed regularly, and Waheeda started charging five rupees extra on Pankajam's mess-bill. Of course Lokamma might not have thought of the consequences. Anyway all information went to Waheeda without fail. Would Waheeda consent to her leaving the place with the Officer? No never. Why should she? Waheeda had paid a hundred rupees to Venkayya, and unless Pankajam paid up that amount, she

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had no right to leave the place. Would the gentleman be willing to pay the money, when he indeed returned keeping his word? Doubtful?

He was in a sad, peculiar mood on that day. It might have been an impulse only. If he ever wanted to remarry, why, he, an officer, without any imaginable defect, could get a nice virgin bride from his own caste. Why should he return for the sake of a prostitute? But, his wife having run away was a stigma and a shame, a factor to reckon with and the man could not think of another marriage and wife ... He would certainly come back. That was her hope. Her hope made his return a certainty; and if he returned, she would go without hesitation! That would be an unshakable decision. How long could she continue in this place and live this life? Nothing worse would ever befall her ... Even if the gentleman were to prove unworthy of her trust, and she were to find herself in the street, she would find some way to live ...

Four days later when Pankajam got up from her sick bed, she conceived the idea of domesticating her street-bitch by chaining it in the house for a few days.

Pankajam's friendship with the street-bitch had a curious beginning. Of the six girls maintained by Waheeda Begum, three were habituated to drink being senior members of the establishment. The three juniors, Pankajam, Lokamma and Ayesha being new-comers were learning to drink, for it was the considered opinion of Waheeda that drink would help the girls in their profession, and would come to their rescue in some difficult situations. Ayesha had learnt it; Lokamma was learning it; but Pankajam found it beyond her to overcome her aversion to drink. One day she managed to gulp some liquor, but it upset her stomach. She had to run fearing to be sick in the kitchen-cum-dining room. And by the time she went to the rear door opening into the gully, she vomitted and was retching frightfully. A street-bitch came up suddenly and started lapping up the vomit, which contained undigested food, and in no time the door-step was cleaned up. Pankajam was grateful to the animal. She felt drawn towards it. And then the bitch did not go away, but was looking at Pankajam expectantly evidently asking for more. Pankajam rushed into the kitchen and brought some food for the bitch. After that the animal became a regular visitor at the rear door, arriving punctually at 6.30 p.m. the hour of their evening meal. Pankajam fed the bitch

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without fail. She gave her the leavings and some rice and bones on her own behalf every day. When this came to the notice of Waheeda, she started charging extra in Pankajam's mess-bill. Pankajam didn't mind and looked upon the bitch as her own. When she was ill, she had asked Lokamma to feed her animal-pet. Now she wanted to domesticate the bitch.

The bitch responded to Pankajam's call briskly waving the tail and approaching her with a dance-movement of its behind. Pankajam fed it as usual and after that put round the animal's neck a yellow leather-belt, hooked it with a chain and fixed the chain to the neem tree in the back-yard. She had got the belt and the chain from the bazaar through Ranayya, the watchman. Pankajam petted and played with the bitch for a while; and at last, when she turned to go inside the house, the bitch stood looking into her face with mute understanding. Pankajam stopped and watched it from a distance. The bitch turned round and round, scratched the ground a little with its fore-legs and then settled down meekly. Pankajam returned late in the night again just before going to bed, and found the bitch asleep in the same spot.

The next morning Pankajam got up very late. She went into the back-yard to greet the bitch. But it was not there! The chain remained fixed to the tree. The bitch was gone with the belt round its neck. She opened the rear door and looked out in vain. She found Akhtar washing himself. Akhtar was Waheeda's brother, an indispensable male-support and was maintained by her. On seeing him Pankajam had a slight suspicion that he might have let off the bitch as a sort of a practical joke. She asked him about the animal. He said: "Go and find it in your small room." The small room was used by the women when they were in menses. Pankajam thought that some one had transferred the bitch to that room and went to look for it. The room was empty, and then she understood the indecent insult implied in Akhtar's remark.

She went to Waheeda. Waheeda was very sympathetic. "I don't know, daughter! Why, where might have the creature gone?" Pankajam asked Lokamma. "It might have been barking and pulling at the chain, and someone must have taken pity on it. Where will it go? Sure to be back in the evening, your precious friend. Watch out till then."

"I wanted to have it with me during the day time so that it might

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get used to me ..." said Pankajam very much disappointed.

Lokamma laughed almost derisively: "Playing with a street-bitch! A street-bitch can never become a house-pet! What a foolish fancy!"

"Why not? Isn't it coming daily?"

"That's different. It comes because it is hungry. Not for your nice company! Waheeda may not approve of allowing it inside the house."

Pankajam suspected Lokamma. Waheeda was generally indifferent to such little things. Indeed she had been sympathetic a little while ago. It must be Lokamma, who unchained the bitch. Well, she, Pankajam must be patient. This was not a serious matter to get angry. The bitch would surely come back; it was now her bitch, her own thing, wearing her yellow-belt, Pankajam counselled herself.

The bitch did not turn up that evening. Pankajam waited for it the next evening, and successively for five evenings. On the sixth evening, as Pankajam opened the rear door, she found the bitch lying on the door-step. Pankajam called it inside. She noticed that the bitch had several wounds on its body. She placed the food at the usual spot. As the bitch limped towards the food, she noticed that it was badly hurt and one hind leg was held up. It had been severely beaten by some one, mauled by dogs, and perhaps stoned by urchins. Pankajam was sorry for it, and as it ate the food, she stood watching it with affection and pity. Pankajam was figuring it out. The bitch had been removed from its usual haunts to a distant corner of the city, and in the new place it got bitten and beaten most heartlessly.

As soon as the poor creature finished eating, Pankajam tried to hold it in her hands and wipe the dirt and blood off the body of the animal. But the bitch growled at her and warned her off. It showed its front teeth with a raised upper-lip, and didn't permit Pankajam to touch it. Perhaps it was apprehensive of the pain Pankajam might cause her; or it was reluctant to be bound again. The bitch had lost its trust in the goodness of human beings.

Pankajam was heart-broken. The bitch turned back into the street.

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A week passed. Pankajam felt emotionally bound to her street-bitch. She gave up the idea of domesticating the animal, whose wounds were healing. But the bitch would not allow Pankajam to pet

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or touch any more. It was however a punctual guest, arriving with a wave of tail, greeting Pankajam and departing promptly at the end of the meal.

Pankajam ceased looking upon Lokamma as a friend any more. While Pankajam was bed-ridden, Lokamma had been able to earn more. Her credit with Waheeda had gone up. Lokamma was behaving condescendingly towards the other girls. Financially Pankajam was in a worse position than ever before. Her account with Waheeda was over-drawn. Though she was ready for the trade, she didn't have more than two clients during the whole of that week. And she was too weak to dance.

One afternoon Waheeda sent for Pankajam. She spoke in her mixed dialect of Urdu-Telugu. The gist of her long-winding talk was: a new Police Inspector had taken charge. A widower with a wild fancy for girls. He had sent word that morning and wanted a nice companion. Pankajam was aware that in all such instances Waheeda sent the girl least in demand at the moment. Listening to Waheeda, her heart sank. Waheeda came out with a new explanation. She said that this Inspector was different and had to be treated with special respect, for he was a connoisseur, and was sure to take offence, if someone in the ordinary run were to be sent. Pankajam had been selected after careful thought. Pankajam alone was worthy to please the *sahib* and bring credit to the reputed name of Waheeda. Pankajam was not taken in by her mollifying words. She had become, without doubt a back-number in the estimation of Waheeda. As an incentive, Waheeda added, that she would make a present of that fifteen rupees, which Pankajam had yet to earn, if she willingly went and returned with the compliments of the officer. This was Waheeda's generosity!

Pankajam sallied forth with full make-up that night.

The Inspector was a man on the wrong side of fifty, pot-bellied and huge, like a dark he-buffalo. Pankajam was not daunted by his appearance. Her problem was drink! He insisted on sharing his drinks with her, and she had to comply, or pretend compliance. She did her best evading and pretending. Her difficulties began after the drinking bout was over. It was nothing but punishment, the punishment, she had dreaded was waiting for her in Hell. The dream, she thought, had come true. For, the man was not a human being. He was pinching, biting and causing her pain in all sorts of ways in all sorts of places. He used her body as his wild fancy led him. He was

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being unimaginably nasty and filthy. Finally he lay like a log and snored.

Pankajam's pride, her will, her self-confidence were crushed. She had thought tears were foreign to her. But on that hellish night she wept and wept till she had no more tears to shed.

The Inspector did not think of sending her back to the establishment the next morning. He decided to take her with him on camp. He sent a message to Waheeda that he was indeed very much delighted, and the lady would be back two days later. When he announced it to Pankajam, she was terrified. She fell on his feet and begged him to take pity on her; that she was very weak and had not yet recovered from her recent illness; that she would be grateful to him in all births to come, if he would kindly send her back. But her pleading was in vain. He said he wouldn't so much as touch her. He just wanted her delightful company. He would take her to a doctor and buy her medicines and tonics. He imagined he was being nice and gentle to her, and saying so he pinched her cheek affectionately! It brought tears into her eyes.

Two days later, returning to her place, Pankajam wondered whether she was Pankajam or someone else! She had been to the other world, to Hell. With wounds all over her body, sadly limping, dusty and dirty, her bitch had so returned, after five days of desolation and hell; returned to her Pankajam, only for the sake of that meal. Hunger indeed was a great urge, and now, she, Pankajam was in the same plight! Could she expect pity from Waheeda? Sympathy from Lokamma? Doubtful! Whoever would bother to think of her!

She heated her own bath-water and had her own fomentation. She pitied herself; wiped her own tears; and loved herself. For two days she didn't speak to anyone; and none spoke to her! They were quite indifferent. She did not think of going and complaining to Waheeda, or narrating her tale of woe to Lokamma. Lokamma did not give her so much as a glance. Pankajam waited every evening for her bitch, waiting for her only friend, but it did not turn up—Pankajam knew at last what to think of it. During her absence, none had fed the bitch. They might have even driven it away with blows and insults. May be she would never again see her friend!

It was a Sunday and Lokamma invited Pankajam to go with her to the matinee show. She would pay for Pankajam. Pankajam excused herself saying she had a head-ache. Lokamma would not listen and

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went on pressing her. Finally she said: "If you go with me, I'll tell you a secret, something that is in your own interest; will you go or not?" Pankajam was curious and felt tempted. She accompanied Lokamma to the show. Lokamma did not easily tell the secret, till the picture was over, and they were returning in a rickshaw.

The next day after Pankajam had left to keep company with the Inspector, a gentleman had called and asked for Pankajam, mentioning her by name. Waheeda said to him: "There is nobody with that name here." "She was here two months ago. Where has she gone" he inquired. "Don't know. We don't keep old stuff. There is fresh stuff coming in, always. Otherwise, who would step into this house, Maharaj?" was Waheeda's reply. The gentleman turned down the other girls and left the place. Waheeda was furious and squarely abused Pankajam for having divulged her real name, against the rule of the house. She gave a long lecture about the risks involved in divulging names and identities. She advised the girls not to converse at length with the visitors. Finally she had asked the girls to keep the episode a secret from Pankajam. It was an order not to be disobeyed at any cost ...

Pankajam understood that he was *that* gentleman, *her* man keeping his promise to come again for her! But her bad luck, she had not been present precisely at that moment! She had been to Hell! Was that *her* fault? How could it be her fault? No! No!!

The rickshaw entered their street.

There was a small group of urchins blocking the way to the house. The rickshaw-wallah rang his bell, and shouted: "Make way, make way!" A few boys turned back and made way. As the rickshaw passed them, Lokamma inquired: "What is it?"

"A dog ... crushed by a lorry ... dead."

Pankajam jumped down and hurried to have a look. The yellow-belt was there ... it was her bitch. Her street-bitch was dead!

□

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THE TANK

Nagaraju Gandham

THE sun was getting really hot.

A breeze was blowing hot, intermittent, listless.

Time was moving impatiently for the panchayat which was sitting on the big platform under the *peepal* tree ...

"There he is, Narisi Reddy is coming"—the panchayat muttered among themselves—it was three hours since the panchayat had sent word to Narisi Reddy.

Chinna Reddy lifted his head up slowly and noticed—Narasi Reddy was not coming alone—the *neerakatti* (who manually controlled and distributed the tankwater among the various fields of the village) Garatalu was coming with him. Chinna Reddy's eyebrows twisted with anger—but he controlled himself.

"What *mama* (uncle)—you think you are invited for a marriage party or what? This is the panchayat. Do you have any idea how long we have been sitting here?" said Saida Reddy, with a forced smile on his face.

Narisi Reddy did not smile—he stood in front of Chinna Reddy with pursed lips.

Because of the heat Narisi Reddy had been exposed to while coming, his whole body was soaked in perspiration—being advanced in years, he was also shaking a bit.

After wiping his face with the upper-cloth, Narisi Reddy asked, "It seems you have sent for me? Why?"

Chinna Reddy did not speak for a moment—"This is the panchayat's summons", he said briefly.

"I know whether it is the panchayat's summons or yours—tell me what the matter is," said Narisi Reddy. "When he knows so much about everything here, doesn't he know what for he has been summoned here?" said Rayappa. Narisi Reddy looked sharply at Rayappa—"I know the matter—but not the exact matter," said Narisi Reddy stubbornly.

"Hey, you keep quiet!" Saida Reddy reprimanded Rayappa.

"Don't listen to that foolish kid's talk! You please be seated first,"

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continued Saida Reddy to Narisi Reddy.

"No need—tell me what the matter is," said Narisi Reddy. Chinna Reddy stared at Narisi Reddy for a while and asked, "It seems you are obstructing them from breaching the tank bund?"

"Yes—the bund lies in a low area—there is only a little water left in the tank, and if the bund is breached whatever little water is there will slip away—that's why I objected to it."

"The panchayat's resolution is to breach the tank bund," said Chinna Reddy.

"Whom did they consult before making the resolution?"

"The panchayat doesn't need everyone's concurrence," said Chinna Reddy, rather cuttingly.

"But everybody in the village needs the tank—that's a common asset of the village—in the name of the panchayat you alone cannot take the decision to breach the tank bund and dry up the tank. Nobody will agree to it," said Narisi Reddy rather more forcefully than Chinna Reddy. Chinna Reddy's face twisted with anger.

"What ... why do you completely change the issue? You think I asked them to build a hut in the dried-up tank for me to go and lie lazily in? This is the district collector's order to find land for Harijans to raise dwellings for them. Anyway, since the tank is no longer in use, we shall give them orders and they themselves will finish the work—and by the end of this month we can get their *pattas* (deeds of ownership)—it is not for my personal benefit that I am doing all this," said Chinna Reddy.

Narisi Reddy looked at Chinna Reddy quietly for a few seconds and asked, "For that you could not find any other way except drying up the tank?"

Saida Reddy who had kept aloof until then spoke softly, "What is that other way, *mama*? Even otherwise how much of the tank is left now? It is not in use—and the tank is no more a tank now. Does it have its original look now?" Even before Saida Reddy had finished Narisi Reddy intervened, "Why does the tank not look as it was? Has it become like that on its own? We have made it like that—because we auctioned off all the trees on the tank-bund, indiscriminately felled them and sent them to the timber yard—the tank is no longer a tank—the mud is dug up recklessly by people and sold to the brick-kilns, that is why the tank is no longer a tank—even now we are still planning to breach the tank-bund to raise dwellings on the

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dried-up tank bed—that is why the tank is no longer a tank. All these days out of respect for the panchayat I have kept quiet, thinking it won't be proper to defy the law... But today if you want to dry up the tank itself, I can't keep quiet."

"Hey—what is this senseless talk—when the canal is there, where is the need for the tank?" said Rayappa rather crossly.

At this Narisi Reddy swiftly turned to Rayappa—"Is it so? Has the arrival of the canal made you incapable of seeing the tank? Yes, you are such a rogue who can send his mother away with the arrival of a wife, how can you appreciate the tank when the canal is there?—listen, all the twenty acres which your father acquired was only because of that tank—because of him only you have become the elder-man of the panchayat", said Narisi Reddy in a sarcastic tone.

Rayappa's face grew dark at this.

Saida Reddy, sensing that things were getting out of control, intervened. "It's not something which you don't know, *mama*. These days the tank is not of much use for the village in any form and it is not a small thing trying to bring back its past glory—so, is there any other way for us to follow except drying up the tank?"

"What is it Saida? You are talking nonsense. How could you in the first place bring yourself to utter such a thing as to dry up the tank? How much service has it done for us?

"During those difficult days when not even a drop of rain fell, all the twenty villages around could get drinking water only from our tank—you people don't know, how much our cultivation depended upon this tank before the arrival of this canal.

"To see that there won't be any quarrels in the village for water ... this Chinna Reddy's grandfather, Pedda Pitchi Reddy and my father, together brought fourteen-year old (then) Garatalu from Chitturu Ammi Naidu's land to work as a water-distributor (*neerakatti*)—starting with distributing water impartially among all the farmers, he did all other miscellaneous work in connexion with the tank—and his family settled here with full faith in the tank. Chinna Reddy's father also brought some tank-digger and potter families for the tank-digging work. Earlier our village never had those families here. They came and settled here with their sole faith in the tank. It is because of the arrival of these people that our village has some life in it. You are destroying the tank—these people are losing the sustenance of their lives—now if you dry up the tank itself... where do

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you think all these folks will go?"

Saida Reddy did not speak. Tatha Reddy, the munsiff who was listening to all until now, addressed Chinna Reddy: "Look here boy! ... what Narisi Reddy says is correct to a great extent. We are bound to benefit by the tank some day—there won't be any loss—if a piece of land is so much needed, the dry land over the high-lying area can be offered, it is lying there as *banjar* (waste land)."

"That upland? How can it be possible *kaka* (uncle)?—that is God's land," said Chinna Reddy.

"So what? That also comes under the common property of the villagers. Besides it is not under cultivation—instead of drying up the tank, it is better to surrender that land," said Tatha Reddy.

"*Chee,* useless fellows! The Panchayat's resolution is not worth a single hair—they are fighting for the un-used tank—as per the resolution of the panchayat, it is decided that the tank-bund will be cut, houses will be raised. Lets see who will stop me," said Rayappa furiously.

Tatha Reddy did not respond—he kept quiet.

When he heard this Narisi Reddy's blood boiled—he shifted the bamboo staff in his hands, from his left hand to his right.

"If you too are of the same opinion, listen Chinna Reddy—out of respect for your family and the village norms, I have come and talked ... not because I can't protect the tank ... tomorrow the tank-bund ... shall not be cut by anyone—if it is cut, then I am not from the *Ippalu* family."

With that, taking long strides, he left along with Garatalu.

Chinna Reddy's face turned red with the insult ... Slowly he rose and stood up. People sat silently, waiting to listen to him. Chinna Reddy cleared his throat.

"Ever since the village was born, no one has challanged the panchayat—this is a village, there is a procedure here—whether you like it or not you have to follow the procedure ... The tank will be drained and filled up with soil as per panchayat's decision—not only that—people who object to this will be banished from the village ..." Saying this, he turned to the crowd—

"Listen Anji Reddy! How you stop your father is up to you—if you want to stay in the village, ask him not to come to the tank-bund—even you should not come." With this he stepped down from the panchayat platform and walked towards the village.

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The sun which had been scorching until now was slowly sliding down, the twilight slowly enveloping the village.

Narisi Reddy did not go home directly from the panchayat. He went and sat at the tank-bund along with Garatalu. They won't let the tank water remain, Narayya", said Garatalu, pulling out a few weeds on the bund. Narisi Reddy did not speak—he kept staring. After a moment's silence Garatalu spoke again. "Even in the *palle* (Harijan colony) they say Chinna Reddy is correct."

Narisi Reddy turned his head and looked quizzically at Garatalu.

"There is a great difference in their understanding of the situation and ours. In the *palle* no one is bothered about the tank; they are only bothered about the land which they are going to get through Chinna Reddy."

Garatalu sighed sadly. Narisi Reddy did not speak—thoughtfully, he shook his head.

Realising that his thoughts were somewhere else, Garatalu did not speak further. The sun was slowly setting in the west; the air was cool and very welcome and soothing. Narisi Reddy suddenly stood up as though he had come to a decision. "Not just the *palle*, Garatalu ... even if the whole village gangs up, we must save our tank—and I shall save it."

And he moved away.

"Just one word, Narayya," Garatalu called him.

"We are aged now ... they are many. It may not be safe for you to go against the village all alone ..." said Garatalu in a warning tone.

"An obscenity doesn't become a decent word simply because several people utter it. Similarly, a bad act can't be accepted just because a large number of people are doing it—under all circumstances the tank must be saved. Anyway, how can I be lonely as long as you are there?" With a gentle smile on his lips, Narisi Reddy walked towards the village ...

As Narisi Reddy reached home, at the entrance itself he came across his son Anji Reddy. Noticing his son, he stopped ... "What is it boy?" said Narisi Reddy. Anji Reddy went away without a word. Narisi Reddy asked his wife Munemma, who gave him water to wash his feet. "What's happened? Your son is going about with a long face?"

Munemma did not say a word—gave him a cloth to wipe his feet. Wiping his hands and feet Narisi Reddy exploded, "I am asking, why don't you speak?"

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"Why didn't you ask him directly?" said Munemma, keeping a plate on the paved floor.

"Did he respond—what is the matter?' 'asked Narisi Reddy, squatting on the floor before the plate. Munemma served him silently. "Shall I give you any pickle?" she asked him.

"Is it a joke or what? You are not telling me what he said?" shouted Narisi Reddy.

"Very nice, he was shouting until now and now is it your turn? I am getting killed between you both!" Munemma said, annoyed.

"What was he shouting about?" asked Narisi Reddy, mixing his rice.

"It seems you had an argument with Chinna Reddy at the panchayat. When it does not hurt anyone in the village, why should it bother you? says your son," said Munemma.

"What .. what does it mean ..."

"What is there? When nobody in the village bothers about the well-being of the tank, why should you alone suffer? What have we got to gain? says your son," said Munemma.

About to put a morsel in his mouth, Narisi Reddy paused—"The food which we eat, the clothes which we wear, and the twelve acres of land which your son claimed as his share are all alms given by the tank only—you better tell your son about this," and he put the morsel in his mouth. "Firstly, if not to while away your time, why should we bother about the unused tank, tell me," said Munemma. Narisi Reddy looked sharply at Munemma, "What is it you people talk? How can your conscience agree to the idea of closing the tank? Ever since we were born, we have been brought up by the tank—in fact, the tank was the only source of our livelihood—don't you have any gratitude? "

"That's not the point. It seems the panchayat has already passed a resolution ..."

Narisi Reddy did not allow her to complete the sentence—"What resolution is that?—they can certainly pass resolutions on people—but who are they to take decisions on the tank, on the small fry that live in the tank, and the birds which use it as a resting place," said Narisi Reddy angrily.

"That's all right ... Now it is not for use—what is the point in having it?" said Munemma.

"You say it is of no use! ... Even today the reason for having

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some sweet drinking water wherever you dig a well in the village is only the presence of this tank near the village ... The trouble is that no farmer in the village has any love for the tank—for a farmer, if the earth is his mother, water is his God—does anyone know about this—what a terrible sin it is to dry up the tank? What is meant by distributing housing sites? Is that out of love for the *palle* people? That is love for the panchayat chair. They can't find land for the housing sites elsewhere, brainless rogues! ... Isn't it like cutting the very branch on which we sit?"

Because of the impassioned talk, Narisi Reddy choked on the food. Hurriedly Munemma served him water. Gently patting him on his head, she said, "It's all right, have your food without getting excited."

Drinking the water, Narisi Reddy calmed down and began eating quietly.

After a little pause, Munemma said softly, "Tomorrow, if you go near the tank bund, they will banish you from the village—this is what your son said—tomorrow he won't go to the tank and he doesn't want you to go either."

Narisi Reddy threw down the morsel which he was eating into the plate. "*Chee*! these immoral fellows, who are they to banish me? I am banishing the whole." And Narisi Reddy washed his hands and left.

The sun rose crimson in the east.

The village woke up earlier than usual—out of curiosity to see what was going to happen that day.

"Listen, I am going to the tank," he shouted towards Munemma who was in the backyard. He carried a staff in one hand and a sheaf of papers in the other. Munemma looked closely at him and asked, "What is that in your hands?"

Narisi Reddy did not answer the question. Getting ready to go, he said, "If your son is back, ask him to wear bangles and sit at home safely in a corner."

"Listen," called Munemma.

Narisi Reddy looked at her, enquiringly.

"Do not get into trouble unnecessarily—you don't even know the ways of polite speech—I am worried, somehow," said Munemma.

Narisi Reddy smiled gently and went close to her.

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"Whether it is you or me, if there is anything to fear or to feel for, that is only the tank's welfare ... not our welfare." And he walked away.

By the time Narisi Reddy reached the tank, people had already assembled there with spades and crowbars. Narisi Reddy looked for Chinna Reddy. He was not to be found; only people from the *palle* were there. Rayappa was supervising everything, except Rayappa, no other panchayat elder was there.

The minute Narisi Reddy noticed that there were spades and crowbars in the hands of those people, he quickened his pace. Straight he went to that part of the bund which lay on the low ground where they had made a marking cut the previous day.

"All of you listen to me just once," he said loudly. The commotion that had started with his arrival subsided with his address.

"Here, you want to make a breach in the tank bund? You want to dry the tank for the sake of housing sites only?—for that you need not do this."

At these words, Rayappa's brows twisted.

"Yes, for generations the tank has been taking care of the village. Now to think of closing it up is a mindless act. What you need is a place to raise your houses. The land by the northern side of the tank is mine—two acres. I gift that to you—take out a *patta* and build your houses—"

For a while all the *palle* folk looked at him unbelievingly.

"Why are you staring like that? Don't believe me?"

Narisi Reddy unfolded the papers in his hands and showed them. "Show them to anyone in the village."

The face of Garatalu who was there along with the others lit up. He made his way out of the thick crowd.

"Yes, I tell you .. what is it we want? Only land—what does it matter who gives it? ... Ever since we were born the tank has been taking care of us—why should we commit the sin of drying it up?"

Many there found it a reasonable argument—slowly, they dropped their crowbars and spades. Rayappa noticed the hesitancy of the *palle* folk.

"Hey!—who are you people—he donates and you people listen to him—you think that land is Narisi Reddy's own? Doesn't he have a son?—do you think he will keep quiet, tomorrow, even if this man wants to give," said Rayappa.

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"This is my own share—my son—my son is separated from me. He has nothing to do with this land," said Narisi Reddy. "If it is not your son, your wife—tomorrow if your wife Munemma comes and claims this land as having been taken away without her consent, these people have to dismantle their houses and become vagabonds?"

Finding some truth in these words, the *palle* folk once again took up the crowbars and spades into their hands.

"Rayappa, don't indulge in panchayat politics here—you know these papers are authentic—don't for nothing incite these folks" said Narisi Reddy sharply.

"Who? You—you are playing politics—if these people raise their houses in the tank, they come nearer to the village and you detest it," said Rayappa.

Even before he had finished talking, Garatalu rushed towards him—"Rayappa, if you lose your tongue again about Narayya (Narisi Reddy) I wont spare you, even though you are a big landlord—if he so much loathes the presence of the *palle* folk, why should he distribute his own land?" he said, speaking as though possessed.

Garatalu's attack on him in the presence of the large crowd offended Rayappa. "You rogue! Attacking me, rascal," Rayappa pushed Garatalu aside. "Cut the bund. I will see who is going to obstruct this," shouted Rayappa.

That's all!

The people who were vacillating until then, moved in a mass, like seawaves surging over the embankment, they rushed on to the bund. Narisi Reddy was taken aback by this sudden spurt of action—by the time he had recovered, they had already begun to breach the bund.

"Don't breach it! Stop, you folks!" he ran shouting towards the bund.

But Rayappa and his men caught hold of him midway—Rayappa gave a victorious smile at Narisi Reddy.

"You wanted to see how they will cut the bund, you see now," he said in a mocking tone.

But Narisi Reddy was in no condition to take his taunting seriously. His heart was entirely with the tank. It is going to be destroyed. If the bund is breached the tank will no more be a tank—wasteland only. As a child, he used to stand there and watch the sunrise over the horizon. Now he won't be able to see the tank again, never again.

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No, it shall not happen, as long as there is life in him the tank bund cannot be breached. With great will-power, Narisi Reddy gathered all the strength in his body and broke loose.

Rayappa who had never expected any resistance from the seventy-year old Narisi Reddy, fell sideways along with his men.

Every blow on the bund was like a blow on Narisi Reddy's heart.

He yelled, "Stop, you folks!"

Narisi Reddy forced his way through the crowd towards the bund. Even before they knew what was happening, a blow aimed at the bund hit Narisi Reddy right on his head—blood gushed out—simultaneously, the bund gave way.

The water gushed on him from the heights as though to anoint him for the supreme sacrifice he had made to protect its existence.

The force of the water made Narisi Reddy slide into the low-lying area. Garatalu rushed towards him, crying, "Narayya". Because of the breach in the bund the water was rushing down with great force.

After being swept away for some distance along with the waters, Narisi Reddy withstood the current among the weeds. Garatalu took Narisi Reddy's head in his lap with much affection, "Narayya ... Narayya ..." Garatalu's voice choked with grief.

Slowly with great difficulty, Narisi Reddy opened his eyes. The blood streamed from his forehead and mixed with the tank water—the water tinted red.

"Finished Narayya—our tank is no more," said Garatalu. Narisi Reddy's eyes turned towards the bund where the breach had been made. By then the tank had been drained completely. The tiny fish, which had been thrown out of water, were mute witnesses.

Garatalu could not understand for a moment the difference he sensed in the feel of Narisi Reddy's body. The minute he understood, he held him in a final embrace, weeping. □

Translated by Vadrewu Vijayalakshmi

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SITA'S HAIR

Volga

SITA sat at the backyard door and started combing her hair. She gathered the thick strands of hair fallen by the roots and put it under her foot. Each time she ran the comb through her hair a lock of hair was combing off. She looked in disgust at the ball of hair under her foot and once again touched her thinning crown indulgently. She was sixty and fell seriously ill a month back. She could recover her strength slowly but her hair had been falling off. She looked anxiously at the silver strings coiled in the black comb. She gazed intently at the grey ball of hair on the comb as if her very life was ebbing away. A whole lot of sweet memories and dreams around her one-time luxuriant hair gushed through her mind.

Even as a little child Sita knew how important hair was for a girl. Only because of her hair, she became conscious for the first time that she was a girl. Her long, thick silken hair, grew day-by-day under her mother's loving care. She would dry several herbs and leaves and boil them in coconut oil to make a perfumed hair oil. She would massage Sita's scalp with the oil and apply it to her long hair. Every Friday when mother gave oil bath to Sita, there was a pell-mell in the house. She would anoint the young girl's head with home-made castor oil and after an hour she would wash the hair with soapnuts. Oh! the buckets of hot water carried into the bathroom and the hours spent in the weekly ritual! That wasn't all. Mother would rub her hair with a towel and expose the half-dry hair to burning incense, which left a sweet smell clinging to the hair until the next wash. Combing the hair and removing the tangles with slow and soft fingers, she would plait her hair in long wheat shaped braids. She would adorn Sita's hair with jasmines and kiss her on the head once the elaborate ritual came to a close saying "a girl's beauty lies in her hair." Sita started identifying herself with her beautiful hair because of her mother's fuss over it and because of the admiring looks of her neighbours and relatives.

Ironically she sometimes got annoyed with her hair when it came in her way. She envied her brothers who sported shaven heads in

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summer. How nice it would be to cut off her hair like them? She would escape the pain and boredom of getting her hair plaited every day. She could run out of the house for play whenever she wanted without running after her mother to get her hair braided. Who could then scold her for loitering in the streets with a tousled head? She could escape the Sunday sessions of torture to rid the hair of lice and nits. When mother pulled close-knit comb through her hair with force to remove the dead-nits Sita saw the very *avatar* of Yama in her.

As these thoughts grew in her mind for sometime, she even revealed her secret wish to her mother, as she combed her hair one day. Mother came down on her heavily. "What a strange girl you are? Any girl would cherish such beautiful hair and adorn it with flowers. These thoughts will not bring you good my girl. Shave the head indeed! What ominous thoughts!" Sita was confused. If boys were great and their shaven heads were great, why couldn't she sport a tonsured head and be great like a boy.

Sita saw a terrible sight one day. She was not even ten then. The maid servant stole something from the doctor's house next door. She was barely sixteen. They shaved her head clean and marked it with lime before sending her away. They did not beat her nor did they call the police. She ran home sobbing piteously. When Sita saw the girl running along the streets covering her hideous head with both hands, she too felt like crying. If the girl were a thief, why couldn't they scold her, beat her or send her to jail. Sita couldn't forgive her neighbours for their wilful cruelty. Before going to bed that night, as she removed the jasmines from her plait and wrapped them in a wet towel to save them for the next day, the image of the weeping maid rose in her mind. She covered herself up in a blanket and wept on late into the night over the girl's plight.

Sita was shifted to a convent in the eighth class. As soon as she entered school she was stunned to see the nuns. She pitied them. She remembered her widowed aunt with the shaven head. But why did these women have bare heads? They were not even married. Sita did not understand why their hair was cut off. The girls used to discuss it furtively.

"Why do they cut off their hair?"

"Because they don't get married."

"What has marriage got to do with hair?"

"If one has no hair, there are no desires."

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"What desires?"

"Desire to adorn oneself with flowers, desire to get married and to bear children."

"Without hair, one cannot get a bridal plait made! How can they get married otherwise?"

Sita started cherishing her hair fondly. She caressed her long plait and thought.

"My Goodness? If I don't have this hair, I won't have any desires. What a pity!"

Another girl said, "It's not so simple. If woman have hair, they look beautiful. The nuns are not supposed to look so."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"But isn't Sister Ignatious gracious even withour hair. She is more beautiful than many women with long hair."

They all nodded their heads in approval.

By the time Sita reached tenth standard there was stiff resistance at home to her wearing two plaits. It was championed by her grandmother. "The girl has grown tall like a palm tree. Isn't it time to get her married? How can she wear two plaits like a little girl?" Her harangue would continue and mother would take it up in a refrain. Sita did not want to change her plaits.

Until six months ago, mother oiled Sita's hair and tied her two plaits tightly into a fold. Then Sita started combing her hair herself. On a teacher's suggestion she admired Sita's hair—she started braiding her hair loosely and let the plaits down. It gave her a youthful look. She looked smarter but became the butt of ridicule at home. They even created a fuss over it.

Sita showed tantrums and continued wearing two plaits. But the pressure was mounted on all sides. She fought them all alone for sometime but finally gave in. She slowly got used to her thick and long single plait. She also cherished the envious looks of other girls at her hair.

Some of them felt that is was not fair that even if they took every known care, their hair did not grow luxuriant. All this was amusing to Sita. There was a funny girl who was close to Sita. She often said, "Doesn't matter whether you have thick or scanty hair! What matters more is what is underneath. The brain. You use all your brains to take care of what is superficial. Stop thinking of your hair and start

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thinking about something else." The girl was Subhadra. She had short hair. Sita thought that she was unfair and spoke out of jealousy.

Sita thought about her hair most of the time and as a result failed in the tenth examination. She got married at sixteen. She was sure that the bridegroom would fall for her beautiful hair. And he did. He praised her hair all the time during the first three months. But he started getting annoyed about her hair soon because it came in the way of many things. Whenever they had to go out she needed at least half an hour to braid her hair. Her meticulous care of her hair also irritated him at times. "What a bother! If you lose a few hairs why do you make a fuss about it? Can't you cut half of it away?" The words brought Sita to tears. After sometime he completely ignored her hair, which galled her even more.

When Sita was barely thirty, the man died leaving two sons behind. Panic gripped Sita's heart as she remembered her grandmother. The old lady might insist on getting Sita's head shaven off. She, indeed, lead a campaign. But Sita's brothers put their foot down. When the heated arguments were going on, Subhadra visited her. Her stance surprised Sita. "Sheer madness! Why should you sacrifice what you got at birth, when the man died? Don't give in to social pressures." These words soothed Sita's tormented mind. She further added, "I don't know whether you loved your husband more than your life but I know how dearly you loved your hair. Don't give in."

She could keep her long hair but she could no longer take care of it without being frowned upon. Her dull uncared for hair was still thick and long. Sometimes memories of intimacy with her husband haunted her. Her whole body longed for his passionate kisses and love. The words she heard in childhood "If one cuts her hair, one will not have any desires," flashed in her mind. Though she knew it was not true, she seriously considered cutting off her hair. She wept, pulling her hair in helpless rage.

Her sister-in-law started resenting the sight of her luxuriant hair. Even the little oil she applied to her scalp became a source of discontent to them. They of course, had short and thin plaits and her long plait suddenly looked more dangerous than a snake. "How long could one adorn oneself as in youth? Isn't it time to put up one's hair?" Their innuendoes hurt her. The day she put up her hair, inexplicable waves of misery flooded her. Did she remember her adolescence or was it because people forced her to accept that she was past youth?

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Whenever she looked at her sons' short hair, she felt a pang and yearned for a daughter. When Subhadra heard this, she scolded her. "If you had a daughter, you would have brought her up exactly like you. She too would have identified herself completely with her hair." Subhadra had cut off her already thin hair so much, that she almost looked like a man now. She was now a teacher but she plaited her daughter's hair. Sita angrily retorted "then why do you plait your daughter's hair?" Subhadra's reply was indeed amusing. "The current trend is for short hair and children spend all their time taking care of their bobbed hair or pony tail. I'll allow my daughter's hair to grow now and make it short once she grows into a woman." Subhadra was eccentric indeed.

But she also did not realise one thing. Even though she did not want to give excessive importance to her hair, it was social pressures which finally decided its make-up even in her case.

When Sita's nieces grew into young women she came to know entirely new ways of hair-care. Shampooing hair, visits to boutique to get the hair cut. They applied lemon, eggs and curd to hair and every other possible semi-liquid from the kitchen went into their hair. They also got their mothers' co-operation in all this. Sita wondered about all these and asked Subhadra one day. She replied in her laconic manner: "I don't know about the efficacy of these shampoos and hair tonics but crores worth of business is going on in the name. When you lose hair, the fellow who makes false hair benefits. When we love our hair too much, the shampoo companies make millions. If all women go for short hair and ruin this business, they will be free of lot of trouble." Sita suspected Subhadra's vehement protests arose out of her own scantiness of hair.

Suddenly something happened in the house which put everyone in a quandary. Sita's niece started getting upper lip-hair. When every known method to get rid off facial hair failed, the girl grew gaunt out of misery. Sita did not understand the dual standards of society in this too because boys were so proud of their moustaches and beards.

Her three sisters-in-law used to discuss the efficacy of the hair-dyes. Sita had a suspicion that they would be happier if her own hair grew grey faster. No one mourned for Sita's hair except Sita herself and it soon turned all grey.

Now almost a month after her hair started falling fast, she remembered her past. Her mother's loving care of hair—the castor oil, soap

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nuts, oil bath and jasmines—the bridal decoration of her long plait, the gripping fear when her husband died, the later comfort when her fear was dispelled, then the forced neglect of her hair and now the falling hair—all these memories stormed through her brain.

"Did this hair grow in keeping with my wishes? Or did I do what others wanted? How many people rode rough shod over me in the care for or the neglect of hair! Why are there so many considerations and so many restraints in moulding a woman's hair! The social pressures which wove a tight net around a woman's hair, wove tighter nets around a woman. Shall I age, perish and fall like my hair or is there an escape? What would my life have been if I had been free of such restraints?" Several vague questions raised a tumult in her mind. □

Translated by C.L.L. Jayaprada

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THE MASQUERADE

Madhuranthakam Narendra

I am not sure whether I woke up when the alarm clock was about to ring or else while the alarm bell was ringing. But I am quite sure that I would have woken up in time even if the alarm clock had not rung. I have tuned my body in such a way that I can wake up at any time I want to. I am not like an ostrich, who, plunging its head into the sand, thinks that the whole world is asleep. Someone may wake up while I am asleep. May peep into my room. So I take all precautions against untoward situations. If I close the windows and turn off the lamp before going to bed at night, even a ray of light can not enter my room till I open the windows the next day after waking up. I gave strict orders to my wife that she should not open the doors and switch on the lights without my permission.

But she pleaded, "How can I send you to the office in time if I do not wake up early in the morning? Children should go to the school before the first bell ..."

I slackened my orders a bit only after a number of such appeals. But I warned her, "you must wake up before dawn, open the door only a little, and leave the room without turning back. Then you should close the doors tightly. Remember, you should not turn back and look at me. If you turn back thinking that I may be asleep, I will not suffer it. It may appear to you that I am sleeping. But beware, I always keep an eye on you."

In fact, I have intentionally woken up early and observed her while she was leaving the room on several occasions. I know it pretty well that she cannot disobey me. But one should not trust anybody blindly. Should one?

I don't leave the bed even a few minutes after the alarm stopped ringing. Only after realizing that I can not sleep any more do I stretch my hand under the cot and drag my secret basket. I carefully take up the cow-head kept cautiously in the basket over the other paraphernalia and wear it on my head. Then I carefully finger the mask to find out whether it has sat properly on my head. After being satisfied, I switch on the light.

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The light burns bright.

I stand up.

The image of my cow-head appears beautifully, humbly and symmetrically on the opposite wall. But the mask appears some-what sloping near the right ear. I adjust it properly. Then I arrange the paraphernalia of my secret basket well and cover all of them with paper-flowers. I take the scent bottle from the dressing-table and neatly spray the scent over them. Now who can find out that they are not real flowers?

This secret basket will hang on my shoulders from this moment till I go to bed at night. I keep it aside only when I change my dress and take bath.

When I step out of the room, my wife cries, "Children! your father has woken up. You have to take bath only after your father finishes bathing."

Children come out of the bathroom.

They go on waiting outside the bathroom till I finish bathing.

They rush into the bathroom when I come out of it.

By then, my wife has kept my dress ready.

I put on the fresh clothes, take the newspaper and sit before the dining table. My wife places the tiffen plate before me and cajoles, "Why can't you chat with me even for a while?"

In fact I don't place any trust in these newspapers. I don't have interest in these trivia. But if I leisurely speak with her, what will she think about me? How can she understand how heavily I work to maintain the family? But today when I look at her desperate face, my heart almost melts with sympathy and even the idea of removing the mask comes to mind for a second. But soon I become adamant as I remember quickly that there is no room for such unnecessary sentiments. I say, "Dear wife, if I keep this paper aside now, will I have the opportunity of even glancing at it? Don't you know that this chariot called our family is moving on smoothly only because I am sweating all the time with the hardwork?"

While I turn the leaves of the newspaper, my wife takes my heels into her hands and slowly adorns it with the socks and shoes.

Meanwhile my son, who comes out of the bathroom after having his bath, fastening a towel round his waist, stands gaping at me with a look of impatience and complains, "Father's office begins at 10 O'clock. But I should go to school by nine ..."

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"Your father should be in the office by 8 O'clock," my wife retorts, "Though his office begins by ten. Don't you know that even the ant in his office will not walk properly if he is not there?"

"My dear wife, do you know what happened in the office yesterday," I begin to say as if I haven't heard the words of my son, "Our officer came fretting and fuming to my seat. I gave him a glass of water and asked him to sit and take rest atleast for a few minutes. Then I asked him what the problem was. He said that there is a controversial procedure in the office. I promised him that I will solve it as easily as Oedipus drove the sphinx to suicide. Then he said, 'Sir, we, all of us, take coffee during the tea-break. What is the meaning of tea-break? Time for taking tea. Isn't it? But all of us prefer coffee to tea. Taking coffee is against the code of conduct. Isn't it a breach of official procedure?"

When I stopped speaking for a while only to intensify my wife's suspense, she mumbles, "yes dear! It is really a big controversy ..."

"The controversy puzzled even me for a minute," I continue, "but the idea struck me quickly. According to the doctors, coffee is less dangerous than tea. So I said, keeping in view the health of the staff-members, the officer can recommend coffee instead of tea. If you are interested, Sir, you can write a foot-note underneath the official records stating this precisely ..." Then I add, "Do you know what my officer did? He brought the palms together to say a *namaskar* ..."

"It is wrong", the words came from the lips of my son, "coffee is more dangerous to health than tea. In fact one should take neither coffee nor tea. Pure milk is always preferable to them. Our madam told this ..."

"Keep quite you naughty boy!" my wife rebukes him for his disobedience, then turns towards me and says, "That nasty school is injecting all wretched things into his brain. We have to get him admitted in another school ..."

My wife twists his ears. He stands silently with the same irritating look in his eyes. Not even a moan comes out of his mouth. I like the boy because of his perseverance and boldness. I must admit that I am also afraid of him because of the same qualities in him. My wife often says that he takes after me in everything. But the truth is that he inherited the physique from his mother and the temperament from me. No doubt he has some flaws. But he is only a kid. He will

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learn all things in due course. I try to laugh and say, "Haven't I told you many times not to punish children in my presence?"

Then my wife retorts, "See, how intensely your father loves you!"

My daughter, who comes out of the bathroom having finished her bath, walks towards me and kisses me on my cheek.

In return my wife kisses her and chides my son, "You don't know how to behave decently. Atleast learn it from your sister." She firmly believes that my daughter has inherited my physique and her intelligence.

My daughter informs, "Mummy! My friend who visited our house yesterday, asked me when she saw dad's photo, whether he is my younger brother ..."

"Who is that baggage?" My wife screams with annoyance. But she immediately comes to terms with the situation and complains as though she is speaking to herself, "Even that tiny gossip is jealous of my fortune ..."

After washing my hands in the wash-basin I snatch three flowers from the basket and give one each to all the three. They smell them profoundly. I know that they will fall into a fit of unconsciousness atleast for a minute. And that minute is more than enough for me to change my mask. I remove the cow-head, place it securely in the secret basket and hang the horse-head on my head. I take the pocket-mirror and look at my image. The horse-head is sitting tenderly, delicately and elegantly on my shoulders.

Regaining consciousness, my wife brings me my brief-case. The look of anxiety in her eyes clearly reveals her eagerness to have me all by herself. I walk out of the house with a lot of satisfaction.

Straight, I go to the house of my friend, Mr. Shorty.

His short, lean and weak body will make anybody giggle any time. Sitting on an old carpet, he is poking his head into the ruins of a book. An old faded water-colour painting hangs on the wall behind him. In a corner of the room, a broken statue stands on a wooden pedestal. I have suggested to him any number of times to throw all this junk into a dust-bin. But he never heeded my suggestion. Moreover he bored me thoroughly with discourses on the people who made them and the artistic excellence of those godforbidden things. But I can not deny one thing. A number of people do hold me in high esteem only because he happens to be my friend. Besides, my wife has tremendous confidence in him. What is it that I loose if

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I spend a few minutes daily with this bore?

"You haven't been here since last week. What happened?", he begins the prosecution.

"Tremendous drudgery in the office," I reply.

He cross-questions with a look of suspicion, "It is a lie. I know that it was not because of the work in the office. You would have roamed about for days on end both in the city and in the forest with that bloody Lengthy. Wouldn't you?"

No use. He will not yield to my arguments.

I pluck a flower up from the basket and give it to him. When he dozes off after smelling the flower, I exchange my horse-head for an ass-head.

After a few minutes, lifting his eyelids with a lot of effort and casting the glances of a typical intoxicated man, he mumbles, "Yes, it is true. Only the working ox will be yoked always ..."

Then I stand up and say, "I am never wearied of spending time with you. But what to do? No leisure. Now I have to go to the office..."

"Do meet me tomorrow. Promise me", he requests.

"Certainly. By the bye, my son's class teacher is not paying proper attention to him. Are you not an expert in such things related to schools and libraries? Why can't you go to the school and try to put him atleast in the other section ..."

I come out of the house even without hearing his reply. I know that he can't sleep till he completes the work entrusted to him. I also know that he will be eager to drink the cup of coffee that my wife offers in the evening when he goes to my house to tell her that my son has been shifted to the next section.

Suddenly my legs stop walking. I am forced to come out of my reverie and look around to find out where I am. The house of my bosom friend, Mr. Lengthy, is there before me. I realise that my legs always bring me to this spot though I walk mechanically.

Mr. Lengthy is in sound sleep. His long, stout and strong body reminds one of a tiger sleeping in a cave. He wakes up only after I push his body three or four times. He opens his eyes, yawns and says, "Yesterday we went to the forest and enjoyed a lot. Trust me, now the body has become as light as a feather ... it is very much like getting the body lubricated."

"Is it? Alas, I couldn't join you. It seems the stars are not in my favour ...", I respond in a desperate tone.

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"Why should you come? I lost control over you the moment your eyes fell on that bloody Shorty. I know that you were with that fool whiling away the time yesterday."

"You have thoroughly misunderstood me. I know him to be a fool. But I meet him occasionally only because he will be of use in some trivial matters. That is all ..."

Still there is the same look of disbelief in his eyes. Then I take a flower from the basket and give it to him as I know that it is the only way of getting out of the controversy.

The two or three minutes during which period he falls into a fit of unconsciousness after smelling the scent of the flower, is enough for me to exchange my ass-head for a wolf-head. While the spell is slowly dissipating from him, he looks at me with satisfaction and mutters, "If you would have attended the party yesterday, you would have realised that there is no use of these incomplete transformations. What is there in these cities? It's all mere ash. The happiness when one loses his existence in the nature by mingling with the animals of the wild forest ... Oh! That happiness is unparalleled.

"What can I do my dear friend," I sigh and say, "I have a wife and children. Responsibilities. Burdens. Cannot survive without the job. Don't you know that I rush to your house whenever I find a minute's leisure."

"Don't tell me about your nasty job and bloody holidays", he argues, "I am telling you in advance. Tomorrow I am going to hold a feast. In the town itself. There is an old mansion in the Main street. You might have crossed the same mansion many times. But you might not have noticed it. It belongs to an old man. When I told him how difficult it was to walk a long way to reach the forest, he promised me that he would create a forest there in the mansion itself. I promised him to bring all my friends to the forest. If you come, it will be to your benefit. Or else, it is left to your destiny." He once again awfully yawns like a whale.

"Should you accuse me thus? Haven't I attended the feasts whenever you invited me? Please take rest. The strain of yesterday's revelry is still visible on your face. I will certainly meet you tomorrow."

Mr. Lengthy smells the flower I gave him once again and smiles with half-closed eyes. I walk heavily as my legs are not willing to come away from the house of my friend. And his smile haunts me till I reach my office.

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All my subordinates salute me when I enter the office. I find out that they are winking at one another. I understand the reason for their winking only when the wall clock strikes more than eleven times. They are all trying to register that I have come to the office very late. But who has the guts to question me?

One young clerk, who comes to me for my signature, tells me with a look of slight reproach, "An old man has been waiting to get this paper signed since morning ..."

I realise that this cur is trying to remind me that I came one hour late to the office. How dare he say such a thing to me? This wolf-head is getting useless. No other go. I have to change my head immediately. But I don't want to change the head while others are watching. I have to divert their attention. Is it necessary to offer a flower to each one of them? Am I to run a choultry of flowers to distribute flowers to every Tom, Dick and Harry? No need, these blokes don't deserve my flowers.

I announce loudly, "Your attention! All of you turn backwards for a few minutes ..."

They turn towards the wall without a qualm.

"You should not turn till I instruct you to do so. Those who disobey my orders will be suspended atleast for three months." After warning them once again I remove the wolf-head and fix the lion-head on my shoulders.

"Now you can turn towards me. Sit properly and work hard", I groan and they bury their heads in the files.

During the lunch-hour, all my subordinates bring me their lunch boxes. Though I take only a mouthful from each box only to test the taste of their lunch, my stomach is filled by the time I complete the first course. Then I permit them to eat. After the lunch-time I order, "Don't waste time. You are not paid for taking rest. Work hard." And I repose in my chair.

Having worked hard since the morning, my body is overwhelmed by sleep. I don't know how long I doze off in the chair itself. When I open my eyes, I see the young clerk standing before me. "I am waiting here to inform you that our officer has asked you to meet him when your sleep is over," says he with a bowed head.

I yawn noisely and enter the special room of the officer.

He scans me from top to toe and mutters, "I want to discuss the different methods of disciplining the member of the staff ..."

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Dragging a chair towards his table and sitting comfortably on it, I say, "Proceed, sir."

He jiggles as if there were a thorn on the cushion of his rotating chair and asks, "Are the employees working properly?"

"Don't entertain such a suspicion, sir," I reply, "They do work sincerely. I inspected them by coming late to the office and paying surprise visits. They are all right."

"But ... Okay ... Now ... you", he minces his words. Then I remember that I have not changed my head. Since a long time, my officer has been having a suspicion that I may try to usurp his seat. To brush the suspicion off, atleast for the time being, there is no way except changing the head.

I pluck a flower from the secret basket and offer it to him. When he is in state of intoxication induced by the smell of the flower, the lion-head on my shoulders reaches the bottom of my secret-basket and in its place a fox-head sits naughtily.

After a few minutes, when my officer slowly opens his eyes, my fox-head winks at him. The comfortable feeling of satisfaction is quite obvious in his eyes.

"I frequently doze off in the office, sir", I say once again, "only to surprise them by suddenly opening my eyes. It is very much like playing hide and seek. But no one is caught red-handed."

My officer seems to be happy now. I stand up, greet him with a goodbye and take leave of him.

I have not left the seat even after the working hours. I sit there pretending to be going through the files. Though my subordinates glance at the wall-clock, none dares to close his files. I leave the office only when I feel that the teasing of the subordinates is enough for the day.

It is almost dark when I arrive at the office of the Fine Arts Academy. By then all the members have assembled in the meeting hall. I know that tomorrow is the last date for the nominations for the election of the working body. I repose in a chair. An elderly man—he is one among the richest men of the town whose number can be counted on fingers—is delivering his lecture neglecting the importance of the commas and full stops. His oration seems to be endless. The others haven't noticed my presence. Finally a member goes to the dais, grabs the mike by force and begins to catalogue his credentials for the nominations for the membership in the working

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body. Then another member snatches the mike from his hands and begins to praise himself as if he were speaking about the greatness of somebody else. I can not tolerate it any more. I run to the dais, grasp the mike and begin to roar, "What will happen to this prestigious association, when every Tom, Dick and Harry wants to be nominated to the working-body? What will be the fate of the sincere workers like me? Nearly one month back, when a concert was held here, who stood at the Lady's entrance and welcomed them? During the dance programme held last month who accompanied the Minister, the chief-guest of the function? It was me. It was me. What happens to the local people when the people of the other regions trespass? See, do we have bangles to our hands? No ... Don't take us for granted. If you are ready, we are also ready for the showdown. Come into the arena. We are ready to prove our strength. If there is a man with moustache on his face, he is welcome for the fight ..."

I know what kind of language is easily understood by the elite of our town. Show me atleast one among them who can deny my nomination. If the situation demands, I can use more powerful and appropriate terminology. I am certainly one among those few who recognise the gift of the gab.

My nomination will pass without much difficulty. I should not miss the opportunity of felicitating the movie-star who is going to be the chief-guest to the drama-festival proposed to be held on the first of next month. In all those photographs to be published in the newspapers on the next day of the function, I should predominantly appear by the side of the chief-guest. I stand up and announce that the person who denies me the opportunity, will face dire consequences.

When I turn aside, the newly-transferred officer who is all smiles greets me and shakes hands with me. Someone had introduced him to me sometime back. Whatever may be his department! I do have some work or other in all these departments. So I reciprocate his greeting and request him "Sir, I have some work with you. Something very very personal. I want to meet you in the office." His face contracts and his eye-lashes interlock thereby making his irritation obvious.

I look all round. Everyone is absorbed in the proceedings of the Academy. I take a flower from the basket and obediently offer it to him. He smells it intensely and loses his consciousness. Within a few seconds I change my head. I am really surprised by my expertise in

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exchanging the heads. The head that elegantly glitters on my shoulders now is that of a chameleon.

The officer mumbles as if he is in a nap, "Sorry, I couldn't find out that you are a great artist. Please meet me in the evening of the first of the next month. I will certainly help you." Then he shakes his head to help himself to come out of sleep and continues, "But I remember that there will be a function here on that day. I think the turn to felicitate the chief-guest on behalf of the Academy will come to you."

"That I can manage sir. The felicitating ceremony will be at the end of the programme. We both can reach here before the end of the last play ..."

"That is all right! We can skip the play, which are always, no need to say, boring," he nods his head.

Orations are still going on in the Academy. But I come out. Yet some motor vehicles are running tumultuously in the streets. I enter a narrow lane as I always prefer them for the Main streets because they are the short cuts to reach the destination. Whatever the way, reaching the destination early is what matters. Isn't it?

The door opens a few minutes after my tapping.

"Damn you," she chides, "Again you are late. You have no interest in me. Don't speak to me. Good riddance."

"Oh! darling! I left the meeting in the middle only to come here early." I drag her body towards me to embrace her.

"Don't touch me. Who can trust you?" she continues to tantalize.

I take two flowers from the basket and give them to her.

She smells them for a while and complains, "Synthetic smell. Artificial. You don't have even real flowers." She throws them in the dust bin.

Yes, the scent was sprayed on them in the morning and, perhaps, the effect is diminished. Fortunately a bottle glittering with light blood-coloured liquid is there on the table. I remove the cork of that bottle, sprinkle the liquid sufficiently on the flowers and give them to her. She takes them similingly and babbles, "Oh, it stinks ..." But she looses consciousness. Then I exchange the head of the chameleon for a dog's-head. When she is about to regain her consciousness, I begin to cajole her "My dear foolish girl! you are my life. Marriage with that woman and love with you. The burdens of family for her and the happiness of amorousness for you. Tedious responsibilities

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are there and cheerful rights are here ..." So saying I successfully switch her from one type of intoxication to a different kind of intoxication.

It is almost midnight by the time I come out of her house. All the streets are deserted. Not even a motor vehicle.

"O, You, stop there," a voice comes from behind and when I turn back a man with an unshaven face and tattered clothes appears gallopping towards me.

I frown at him and cry, "You have become a big headache to me."

But he strides along with me and argues, "The head on your neck is not normal. Your right shoulder stoops as if a weight is hung on it. What is the reason? I will not leave you without knowing the truth ..."

As it becomes inevitable, I take a flower from the basket and give it to him. He plucks two petals from it and chews them.

"You batty! Don't you know that flowers are for smelling not for eating ..." I rebuke.

"Do you think that I am a common man who does what every body else does? I am a poet. My duty is to find out the truth. These flowers are not genuine. The taste is different. Tell me the truth. What are they?"

I free my hands forcibly from his grip and run home without looking back.

Children are in sound sleep.

My wife welcomes me with a smile and serves food.

I come to my bed-room after the dinner.

My wife is cleaning the dishes.

I switch off the light, remove the basket from my shoulders and push it under the cot.

Though I often sleep without removing the other head, it frequently slips off while I am asleep. Why should I wear it if it is going to drop from its place while I sleep? So whenever I remember the presence of it on my shoulders, I do remove it and keep it in the basket. Moreover, having carried many heads, there are many scabs and scars on my shoulders. Won't they need some rest?

I remove the dog-head from my shoulders and keep it in the basket.

My wife enters the room, with a cup of milk in her hands. She walks three steps further in the darkness that she has got used to.

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stretches her hand towards me and begs, "Take it, please."

I sip the milk and order, "Massage my legs. I am damn tired having walked so much ..."

She comes nearer holding the edge of the cot.

Suddenly the electric bulb glitters. I understand that the light was put on when my wife's hand fell on the switch. But I don't know whether she did it accidentally or intentionally.

I startle and look at the mirror fixed exactly opposite to my bed.

The beating of my heart is clearly audible to me. My image in the mirror makes my hair stand on end.

I tremble and turn aside to look at my wife. She is stupified.

I throw the milk glass as speedily as I can at the mirror and the broken-pieces of mirror fall on the ground with a jarring sound.

Shivering like cat drenched to the skin, my wife somehow manages to stand up and mutters as though saying something to herself, "I will sweep the glass-pieces away."

When she bends forward to take the broom-stick, she shrieks in pain. Dropping on the bed she wails, "The broken glass has cut my finger."

Quickly I bend forward and switch off the light. Then I take the hand of my wife and put the bleeding finger into my mouth.

We sit like that for sometime.

I am sure my wife is consoled by my kind act.

The taste of the blood of my wife is so nice.

I contract my lips to suck some more blood. It is hot and salty.

Often breaking the mirror and sucking atleast a few drops of the blood of those who suspect me—that also appears marvellous and exciting.

Today that girl looked at me with suspicion. I should taste the blood of that gossip. O, yes, the blood of that bloody poet also ...

□

Translated by the Author

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MOTHER

R.M. Uma Maheshwara Rao

THE whole community abused my aunt Kanakam in a hundred different ways. I heard the voices of the women sitting on a cot in pandal in front of my other aunt's house.

The crows on the neem tree beside the pandal seemed to be competing with the women.

"Your aunt is possessed. She would kill her own daughter. Poor Rajamma! At a time when she needs to feel secure in the mother's bosom, she is thrown out by that very mother." My mother said.

"Yes, Rajamma did commit a mistake. So ... can anyone and everyone take the liberty of punishing her? Leave alone that husband of hers. How dare her sister's husband and the ass of a guest beat her! But for her own mother?" my other aunt raised her fist.

Padmamma took the cue. "Is she her mother? Is she a woman even? She mauls the poor child as if to take her life-blood out. May her hands and feet break."

"Look at the girl! She has become her own shadow! Poor wretch! Everyone comes down upon her. Are they all so pure?" Nelamma's voice shivered.

Manoranjanamma pleaded, "Let me tell you one thing. Every marriage is but a game of snakes and ladders. A husband can even thrash his wife within the four walls of his house. But why wash the dirty linen in public? Umm. That fool of her husband."

A crow on the neem tree flew over and fell on the electric line. It lost some of its feathers. The horde of the crows were now after the lone crippled crow and were making a frightful noise.

Nelamma tried to drive away the crows with another energetic bouts of abuse.

"Whatever you all say! Kanakam is not a mother who bore her own children. Hers is not a woman's heart. She is a monstress."

I could understand their rage and disgust. But my aunt Kanakam was a naive villager and was easily led and misled by emotions. I had been watching her since Rajamma eloped.

Rajamma was my aunt Kanakam's second daughter. Her elder

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daughter was lucky in marriage and had entered a fairly rich household. Rajamma was given to my uncle's nephew. Aunt didn't like the match at the outset. The marriage finally took place on the urging of my uncle Venkata Muni. Moreover everyone praised Natarajan's success and good fortune.

Natarajan used to work in the cotton mills. Once the workers struck work and half of them, along with Natarajan were laid-off. He was on the point of starving. His father was indifferent to domestic problems. He was from a far off Tamil country. He used to work in Madras and visit home once in three or four months. If he had any money, he would give it at home. Natarajan had to support two grown up unmarried sisters also.

In those days Natarajan's maternal uncle came to the rescue of the family. He helped Natarajan open a bunk on the bank of the village tank. The young fellow was talkative, smart and enterprising. He would talk to everyone warmly. The business picked up soon. He also started lending money at the same place. Within two years, he got his house the new fashionable roof tiles; got one sister married and sent the brother to college. In fact he found it tough managing the business single-handed. He soon got married to Rajamma. She lent a helping hand to Natarajan at the bunk and reduced the burden of chores for her mother-in-law at home. Whenever he went around for the collection of money, she would run the business at the bunk. Soon their cosy and peaceful marital life became the talk of our village.

They had two children. Happy life. When everything was going on smoothly, Rajamma eloped.

Before they could start the search, she was spotted at Venku Nayudu's house.

The village surrounded the house. Rajamma came out and told the elders candidly that she wouldn't return. They all talked to her, about good and evil, children's future and persuaded her to come back. She did. No one knew whether love or passion motivated her, she was back at Venku Nayudu's threshold on the third day.

Our people were infuriated and Venku Nayudu simply absconded.

Venku Nayudu was a clerk in the Co-operative Society. He came from the East. He had a wife and children. Venku Nayudu was a hero in our village. He kept four buffaloes and sold milk and butter milk. Within four years he had built a modest but comfortable house.

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Hard work had hardened his body. He was tall and hefty. In physique, he looked like a king who had kept aside his crown out of boredom.

"Any woman would fall for such a man," old Manoranjanamma spoke again in a low tone.

Everyone expected him to stand up to any mob. But when our people fell on his house like live coals, he ran away leaving behind even his wife and chilren.

They dragged Rajamma out. It was not one hand that hit her and one tongue that railed her. Surprisingly it was my aunt Kanakam who was most pitiless. Rajamma sat cross-legged on the earth in the street corner under the neem tree and refused to move.

"What did you lack? I gave you clothes, food and shelter," Natarajan hit her with the tightened fist. She writhed in pain and fell on earth. He kicked her on her belly. She fell back. He pulled her by her hair to her feet and pounded her with the hardened fist.

Rajamma's sister's husband took over. "Can we ever hold our heads up in the village again?" He kicked her in the flanks several times and slapped her.

Nagayyah, a relative who came on a short visit also struck her again and again.

Natarajan came forward once again. He pulled Rajamma to her feet and brought down his fist on her nose. She staggered and sank to earth. Again a kick in the belly. She groaned like a beast and fell back. He raised his foot again. Aunt Kanakam who stood at the trunk of the tree leaped forward.

"My son! you stand aside." She set him aside and gave Rajamma a few kicks.

"Why have you turned evil suddenly? You need a paramour, don't you, slut? you have beautiful children and a good husband who keeps you like a queen. What prompted you?" She pulled up her daughter by hair and slapped her on both her cheeks.

"Why lead this shameful life? Jump into a lake or well". She struck her again.

Rajamma was silent and motionless. Not a drop of tear on her reddened dark cheeks. She writhed in pain but held back her tears with all her strength.

"I can't live with her anymore. Let her die wherever she likes. Send word to Ranganna. We will decide," saying thus Natarajan took a few steps and stood aside. People started slipping away one by one.

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Rajamma's form in ragged and torn clothes and bedraggled hair fell in a heap on a mound of rubble under the solitary neem tree.

After a while she got up. Without bothering about her hair or the slipping *pallu* she took a few steps heavily towards Aunt Kanakam's house.

Aunt Kanakam walked quickly and blocked the doorway.

"Stand there you devil! Where are you coming? Is this your lover's house? Get out. If you take one more step I'll break your legs and put them in the stove? Never step into my house again. Go, you whore." Aunt Kanakam yelled so loudly I am sure everyone in the village must have heard.

She saw Natarajan moving away from the neem trunk and said "Nataraja, stay there. Where are you going? This is a business between man and wife. She is your slave. Kill her or keep her alive. It is up to you. I don't need this disaster on my house." She dragged Rajamma by her hair and left her at Natarajan's feet.

Rajamma pulled herself up suddenly and walked towards her mother-in-law's house.

On the third day Rajamma's brother Ranga Rao came. He worked in Vijayawada. Not a man to bother about mother and sister. When they had telegrammed him on his father's death, he had come and left the very next day. He had again come on the day of the ceremony. He has married a woman of higher station.

An hour after coming to the village, Ranga Rao entered Natarajan's house.

Rajamma had gone without food or drink for several days and lay on the floor like a heap of soiled clothes.

As soon as he entered the room, he gave her a hard kick in the stomach. "Why lead this miserable life? Wretch, you could have died somewhere. Can we ever live with honour and prestige in the community again? Don't ever think of returning to us." She didn't even try to duck from the merciless blows.

"Spit! you spit on her face! Look at the shameless bitch" so saying Aunt Kanakam separated Rajamma from Ranga Rao's grip.

"Let small-pox take her. People should spit on the shameless wretch's face." She looked towards the mother-in-law's face for support.

The grim lady turned her face and walked away in quick, short steps.

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"Nataraja: She dragged your life into the street. Will she ever be redeemed? I cannot bear my misery when I look at you and the innocent children. How thin have you grown my son? Because of this slut's shamless act you have given up food and drink for three days. My son! Raja?" she held him to her bosom and broke into sobs.

Natarajan also burst into tears.

"Die anywhere! Do what you like! She is not my sister. Don't thrust her burden on me," said Ranga Rao before leaving.

Of course, the brother was afraid of his wife and proved hopeless. But why is the mother, who bore the child in her womb for nine months, so merciless?

I put the same question to Aunt Kanakam that evening when we were alone. She looked up.

"My boy! I know people have only contempt for me today. I bear silently their abuse for the sake of my child. If that fellow thinks that she has a place to go, he would never take her back. He will marry another woman and my daughter can never be happy again. Then all the shameless fellows in the village will pester and make her life a hell. If he knows that she has no place at mother's house, she may be kept at his feet like a servant, even if she has no place in the conjugal bed. Only for her sake I hardened my heart." She quickly wiped her eyes.

I was looking at the mother. My eyes blurred. I left her hastily and went out hiding my face from her.

But Rajamma's life didn't get into the groove as Aunt Kanakam wished. Even after six months there was no change in Natarajan. She had a place neither in his bed nor at his feet. Everyone in the house was indifferent to her nor did they enquire if she had food or water. If she tried to mix with others, they showed her sheer contempt. If she combed her hair, there was a sharp word, if she washed her face some other barb. If she took a few steps towards the threshold, there was suspicion on the faces around. If she tried to do any chores at home she was humiliated. The insult and humiliation went on and on.

Now my aunt Kanakam entered the arena. "Nataraja! She committed a mistake, no doubt. But my child has not even looked at the fellow's face again. You should forget the past now. If not for her, at least for the sake of your children. You should accept her again and lead a normal life," she appealed to him earnestly.

There was no change in the situation. Rajamma's life continued

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to be miserable.

One day when they were about to light lamps, Aunt Kanakam tucked her *pallu* around her waist and marched towards Natarajan's bunk. She stood in the middle of the street and abused him very loudly.

"You ass! Do you have any sense and discretion, any respect for elders? Because you are my son-in-law I touched your feet and asked you to take my child back. The more I importune the more stubborn you become. That fool of her brother is hen-pecked and left her in her misfortune. But remember I am still alive. You may think, if Rajamma starves without food and drink and dies, you can marry again. I won't keep quiet. I won't allow it. You and your mother seem to be plotting it," she looked around.

"If the man is fit, why does a woman crave for other men? I swear by Munnar Swamy in this temple. Listen, all of you ... All those who condemned me. If there was nothing wrong with this wretch, would my child commit such a mistake? My daughter will have neither peace nor happiness with this spineless, impotent fellow.

"You listen, all of you! My daughter will not take any more abuse and beatings from this eunuch. I take her back. I will protect and nourish her like an unborn child. God will give her support if no one else does. She has arms and legs like you. She will eat her food, drink her water. If she crosses your threshold again, you can beat her with your left chappal." She was about to go back but turned again.

She stood directly in front of Natarajan. "If my daughter even looked at your face again, call me a bitch," saying this she turned back. She gathered the heap of bones lying in the corner of Natarajan's house into her hands tenderly and carried her home like a small child.

★ ★ ★ ★

Now we have two bunks on the bank of the lake.
Rajamma's bunk has as good a name as Natarajan's had once.

□

Translated by C.L.L. Jayaprada

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'What Is My Name?'

P. Satyavathi

A young woman: before being a housewife. A woman, educated, and cultured and intelligent, and able, quickwitted, with a sense of humour and elegance.

Liking her beauty and intelligence, as also the dowry which her father offered, a young man tied the three sacred knots around her neck, made her the housewife to a house and said to her, 'Look, my dear little girl, this is your home.' Then the housewife at once tied the hem of her saree around her waist, and daubed the entire house and decorated the floor with *muggulu* (designs with flour). The young man immediately appreciated her work. 'You are dexterous in daubing the floor—more dexterous in drawing the *muggulu*. Well done! Keep it up', saying it in English once again he praised her, giving her a pat on the shoulder. Overjoyed by this the housewife began living with daubing as the chief mission in her life. Always she scrubbed the house spotlessly clean and beautifully decorated it with multi-coloured designs. That's how her life was going on, with a sumptuous and ceaseless supply of daubing cloths and *muggu* baskets.

But one day while going on scrubbing the floor, the housewife suddenly asked herself, 'What is my name?' The query shook her up. Leaving the daubing cloth and the *muggu* basket there itself, she stood near the window scratching her head, completely lost in her thoughts. 'What is my name—what is my name!' The house across the road had a name-plate hanging, Mrs. M. Suhasini, M.A., Ph.D. Principal, 'X' College—yes, she also had a name like the neighbour—how could I forget like that? In my scrubbing zeal I have forgotten my name—what shall I do now? The housewife was perturbed. Her mind became totally restless. Somehow she finished her daubing for the day.

Meanwhile the maidservant arrived. Hoping she at least would remember, the housewife asked her, 'Look, girl, do you know my name?'

'What is it *amma*? What do we have to do with names of the mistresses! You are only a mistress to us—the mistress of such and such a white storeyed house, ground floor, means you,' said the girl.

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'Yes, poor thing, it is also true, how can you?' thought the housewife. The children returned from the school for lunch in the afternoon.

'At least the children might remember my name'—the housewife thought.

"Look, here, children, do you know my name?" she asked.

They were taken aback.

"You are mother—your name is mother only—ever since we were born we have known only this much, our letters are only in father's name—because everyone calls him by his name, we know his name—you never told us your name—you don't even get letters addressed to your name," the children said simply. 'Yes, who will write letters to me? Father and mother are there but they only make phone calls once in a month or two. Even my sisters are immersed in daubing their houses. Even if they met in some marriages or *kumkum* ceremonies, they chatted away their time talking about new *muggulu* or new dishes, but no letters!' The housewife was disappointed and became more restless—the urge to know her own name grew somehow or other.

Meanwhile a neighbour came to invite her to a *kumkum* ceremony. The housewife asked this neighbour, hoping she at least would remember her name. The lady giggled and said, "Somehow or other, I haven't asked your name nor have you told me. Right hand side, white storeyed house, or there she is that pharmaceutical company manager's wife, if not that fair and tall lady, that's how we refer to you, that's all," was all that the other housewife could blurt out.

Now it is of no use. What can even children's friends say—they know me only as Kamala's mother or some aunty—now my husband is the only refuge—if anyone remembers it,it is only he.

At the night meals, she asked, "See, I have forgotten my name—if you remember it wont you please tell me?"

The husband burst out laughing and said, "What is it dear, never had it happened before, today you are talking about your name. Ever since we were married I have got used to calling you only as *yemoi* (hey dear). You too never told me not to address you that way because you have a name of your own—what's happened now—everyone calls you Mrs Murthy, don't they?"

"Not Mrs Murthy, I want my own name—what shall I do now?" she said in anguish.

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"What's there, *something or other* you choose a new name, this or that" the husband advised.

"Very nice—your name is Satyanarayana Murthy, will you keep quiet if I ask you to change your name to Siva Rao or Sundara Rao? I want my name only," she said.

"Its all right, you are an educated woman—your name must be on the certificates—don't you have that much of commonsense—go and find out," he advised her.

The housewife searched relentlessly for her certificates—in the almirah, pattu sarees, chiffon sarees, handloom sarees—voile sarees—matching blouses—petticoats—bangles—beads—pearls, pins, *kumkum bharinas* (small silver boxes for kumkum), silver plates, silver containers to keep sandalwood paste, ornaments, all things arranged in an orderly fashion. Nowhere could she find her certificates. Yes—after marriage she had never bothered to carry those certificates.

"Yes, dear—I haven't brought them here—I shall go to my place, search for my certificates and enquire about my name, and return in a couple of days" she asked for her husband's permission. "Very nice! Must you go just for your name or what? If you go who will scrub the house these two days?" said her lord. Yes, that is true—because she scrubs better than the others, she had not allowed anyone else to do this job all these days. Everyone is busy with his own respective duties. He has his office—poor things the children have their studies to take care of. Why should they bother about this chore, so she has been doing it all along—they just don't know how to do it of course!

But still, how to live without knowing one's name. It is all right since all these days the question had not occurred to her, it is really painful to live without a name.

"Just for two days manage somehow or other—until and unless I go and get my name I find it difficult to live" she pleaded with him and managed to get out of the house.

"Why, dear daughter, you have come so suddenly? Are your children and husband all right? Why have you come alone?"

Behind affectionate enquiries of the father and the mother there was the strain of suspicion. Recollecting immediately the purpose of her visit, the housewife asked her mother most pitifully, "Mother, tell me, what is my name?"

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"What is it child, you are our elder daughter. We gave you education up to B.A. and got you married with fifty thousand rupees as dowry. We took care of your two deliveries—each time we alone bore the expenses of the hospital. You have two children—your husband has a good job—a very nice person, too—your children are clean-mannered."

"It's not my history, mother—my name I want. At least tell me where my certificates are."

"I don't know, child. Recently we cleaned out the almirah of old papers and files and arranged some glassware instead. Some important files we kept on the attic—we shall search for them tomorrow. Now what is the hurry, don't worry about them—take a good bath and have your meal, child" said the housewife's mother.

The housewife took a good bath and her meal, but she could not sleep. While scrubbing the house, humming happily, joyfully, and making *muggulu,* she had never thought that she would have to face problems like this, forgetting her own name.

Dawn broke, but the search for certificates on the attic among the files had not ended. Meanwhile the wife asked each and everyone she met—she asked the trees—anthills—the tank—the school where she had studied—the college. After all the shouting and the wailing, she met a friend—and succeeded in recovering her name.

That friend was also like her—married like her, but she had not made scrubbing the sole purpose of her life. But scrubbing was only part of her life: she remembered her name and the names of her friends. This particular friend recognized our housewife.

"Sarada! my dear Sarada!" she shouted and embraced her. The housewife felt like a thirsty man, parched totally and dried up, about to die—getting a drink of water from the fresh *kooja* (goglet) poured into his mouth with a spoon and given thus a new life. The friend indeed gave her a new life—"You are Sarada. You came first in our school in the tenth class. You came first in the music competition conducted by the college. You used to paint good pictures also. We were ten friends altogether—I'm meeting all of them some time or other. We write letters to each other. Only you have gone out of our reach! Tell me why you are living incognito," her friend confronted her.

"Yes, Pramila—what you say is true. Of course I'm Sarada—until you said I could not recollect it—all the shelves of my mind were

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taken up with only one thing—how well I can scrub the floors. I remembered nothing else. Had I not met with you I would have gone mad" said Sarada named the housewife.

Sarada returned home, climbed the attic and fished out her certificates, the pictures she had drawn—old albums, everything she succeeded in getting out. She also searched further and could find the prizes which she had secured in school and in college.

Overjoyed she returned home.

"You have not been here—look at the state of the house—its like a *choultry*. Oh, what a relief you are here, now it is like a festival for us, dear," said Sarada's husband.

"Just scrubbing the floor does not make a festival, dear, by the way, from now onwards don't call me *yemoi geemoi*."

"My name is Sarada—call me Sarada, understood?"

Speaking thus, she went inside, humming joyously.

Sarada who had always cared so much for the discipline, keeping an eye on every corner, checking if there is dust, checking if things were properly arranged in their correct and respective places, now sat on the sofa which had not been dusted for the last two days. She sat there showing the dolls which she had brought for her children. □

Translated by Vadrewu Vijayalakshmi

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TELUGU LITERATURE TODAY

Amarendra Dasari

TELUGU, the language spoken by the people of Andhra Pradesh, has a thousand year old literary tradition. During the medieval ages, Telugu literary activity was confined to the royal courts. The form was metrical poetry. The subject matter was romantic, mythological or spiritualist. Most of the works were either translations of Sanskrit classics or their adaptations. However, there were flashes of brilliance. Peoples' poets like Vemana thought about the common man way back in the 17th century.

Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu, the great social reformer, gave a new thrust to Telugu literature in the last quarter of the 19th century. Borrowing freely from western thought, he successfully used the modern literary forms—the novel, the essay and the drama—to propagate his reformist ideas. Mahakavi Gurazada, a contemporary of Veeresalingam, consolidated those modern trends and laid a solid foundation for modern Telugu literature. His long play "Kanyasulkam" (Bride Money), short story "Diddubaatu" (A Correction) and various poetic compositions are still considered classics and trend setters.

Throughout the 20th century, the Telugu literary activity has been spirited and agile. It has responded to all major national and international developments—be it political, social, economic or purely literary. This agility, coupled with a thousand year old tradition has resulted in a rich crop of outstanding literary works.

1

In spite of the emergence of various modern forms

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of literary expression, the oldest form, poetry, still rules the roost in Telugu.

While the first quarter of the 20th century was flooded with neoromantic poetry, the second quarter witnessed an entirely new trend. Influenced by the global developments during the period between the two great wars, Telugu poetry took a distinct 'progressive' turn under the leadership of the great poet Sri Sri. This turn towards the left, retained its impact on Telugu poetry for 50 long years—from the'30s to the'80s.

Emergence of Digambar Kavulu, the 'naked' poets, during the mid-sixties was a phenomenon of immense significance. Rejecting all earlier social, political and literary norms, this set of six very young poets tried to give a 'shock treatment' to society. They did succeed in 'shocking' the society thanks to their sensational and uninhibited abusive language. But it is debatable whether they had succeeded in the 'treatment' part of it.

However, the trend set by them was the fore-runner for the Revolutionary Writers Movement, that took shape in 1970. Established 'progressive' writers such as Sri Sri joined hands with the new breed of poets such as 'Digambara Kavulu' to propagate the cause of communist revolution. This movement held its sway for a decade and half.

On the other hand, specific poetic trends such as 'Poetry in Free Verse' and 'Mini Kavita', made their presence felt during the 60s and 70s. Much before the recent developments in the Soviet Union, the efficacy of relegating a powerful medium such as poetry to the propagation of a particular ideology came under slow but steady criticism. Humanist attitudes and 'personal feelings' came to find greater articulation. This helped veteran poets such as C. Narayana Reddy, Ajanta and Gunturu Seshendra Sarma to voice their points of view.

The 80s saw the emergence of young poets such as Ismail, Sivareddy and Jayaprabha. While retaining the progressive mould, they broke loose from the ideological rhetoric. This helped them to span out into the broader areas, concerning and of human values, personal experiences and gender inequalities.

The attempt to revive the metrical form of poetry continues till date. But, the fact remains that this form of poetry is a thing of the past.

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2

The second quarter of the 20th century saw the emergence of the Telugu Novel as a powerful literary medium. Remarkable novels such as *Malapalli* (The Untouchables Colony) by Unnava Lakshminaaraayana, *Maidanam* (The Open Field) by Chalam and *Ekaveera* by Viswanatha Satyanaaraayana were published during this period. This form took into its fold the committed writers such as Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao, Mahidhara Ramamohana Rāo, Upalla Lakshmana Rao and Gopichand during the 40s and 50s.

Raachakonda Viswanatha Sastry was a trend setter. Unlike most of his predecessors, he shifted his emphasis from middle class life—which was the theme of his 1952 classic *Alpajeevi* (A Man of No Significance)—to the downtrodden and came out with powerful novels such as *Raju-Mahishi* and *Sommalu Ponaayandi* (We Lost Our Cattle, Sir). His language was down to earth, his style was inimitable and his use of the simile and the metaphor was mind-boggling; his prose was not at all prosaic.

The Telugu Novel witnessed the emergence and dominance of a set of noteworthy women writers such as Malati Chendur and Ranganaayakamma during the 50s and 60s. The late 70s however saw the emergence of popular novelists, such as Yandamuri Veerendra Nath. With an eye for wholesale commercial success, they foregrounded sex, suspense and violence. This popular wave, fanned by a new breed of mushrooming Telugu magazines which serialised such novels, swept the Telugu literary scene for almost a decade. Mercifully, there are indications that this wave is currently on the wane.

The modern Telugu short story dates back to 1910; with Mahakavi Gurazada laying its foundation. Great story tellers such as Sripaada Subramanya Sastry and Chalam developed this genre, in the 30s, into a great art form. Later writers such as Chaaso, Palagummi Padmaraju, Buchhi Babu and Puranam Subramanya Sarma continued the tradition. International recognition to an Indian short story was achieved in 1951 through Padmaraju's *Gaalivaana* (The storm).

Emergence of socially committed story writers such as Raachkonda Viswanatha Sastry and Kaalipatnam Rama Rao during the 60s took the Telugu short story to new pinnacles of glory. This trend was supplemented by writers such as Munipalle Raju and Madhuran-

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takam Rajaram whose commitment to life resulted in noteworthy short stories. But the Telugu short story too suffered a lot under the onslaught of the 'pop'novel during the past decade and a half. However, thanks to the efforts of a set of sincere Telugu writers, the short story is now regaining its youth. At least a hundred good short story collections have come out during the past four years and have been received well.

3

On the Drama-front, a classic like *Kanyasulkam* of Gurazada did emerge a hundred years ago. A powerful dramatics' movement under the aegis of 'Praja Natya Mandali' during the 40s and 50s witnessed powerful plays such as *Maabhoomi* of Sunkara and *NGO* of Atreya. The 60s saw the emergence of noteworthy dramas such as *Nijam* (The Truth) by Raachakonda Viswanatha Sastry and much discussed plays such as *Maro Mohenjodaro* (Another Mohenjodaro) by N.R. Nandi. However, today Telugu drama is at its lowest ebb. Lure of money from the tinsel world of Madras can be said to be the prime reason for this sorry state.

Literary criticism, which was a neglected area for long, has gained prominence of late with the emergence of established critics such as R.S. Sudarshanam and Rachamallu Ramachandra Reddy who contributed considerably during the 70s. A new set of critics such as Vallampati Venkatasubbayya, Cheraa, Afsar and Jayaprabha have recently come up with significant works in this area.

Translations from other Indian languages and English have always been popular with the Telugu readers. While the great Indian writers such as Premchand and Sarat Chandra were household names in Andhra Pradesh, Telugu readers are familiar with practically all other famous Indian writers and even with a set of prominent international writers—through translations. The urge of Telugu readers for good translated literature is so strong that an entire Telugu monthly magazine, *Vipula,* has been serving this cause for sixteen years now. However, translations of Telugu works into other Indian languages (and English) continue to be scanty.

4

Besides the above, specific trends have also emerged in contemporary Telugu literary scene, the foremost being Feminism. Way

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back in the 30s, when Chalam took up this cause, he was practically alone. Of course, Chalam was not 'the' pioneer of feminism. Realising that the 'soft speaking' in the manner set earlier by Gurazada and Sripada Subramanya Sastry does not work, Chalam chose to be 'brutally frank' about the cause of women and he emerged as a powerful torch-bearer of this cause. He was abundantly discussed but remained a taboo in Telugu domestique of those days.

Later on, when Ranganayakamma took up the womens' cause in the 60s and 70s, she met with partial success. But, she too remained a loner. The 80s, particularly the late 80s, saw the emergence of a set of committed feminists led by Volga and Jayaprabha. They chose various forms such as the novel, the poem, the essay and literary criticism to propagate their cause.

Their emphasis was on the womens' right to express their own feelings in their own language and idiom. They could successfully prove that even the liberal, progressive and revolutionary writings of yester-years were male-oriented and anti-women particularly in view of the literary epithets employed by the male writers. Telugu readers could not help realising this point. Present day Telugu literature is extremely conscious, cautious, sensitive and reflective of the women's point of view.

Emergence of writers and poets from the bottom strata of the society is another trend worth mentioning. While the tendency to voice the subaltern point of view dates back to the 30s, the torch was carried all through by a set a sincere middle class writers. This at times led to distortions and resulted in a tone of patronisation. This aspect is now effectively taken care of by poets such as Gaddar and Vangapandu and story writers such as Allam Rajiah and Boya Jangayya.

The Telugu magazines and periodicals and even the daily news papers are playing a significant role in literary growth. Despite being commercial in nature, they have helped launch new writers and new literary trends. Thanks to these magazines, it is now possible for a new writer to establish himself in Telugu literature, even before the publication of his maiden book. These magazines, through their columns and literary supplements, have helped establish new literary trends. □

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Sixty Years Of Telugu Poetry: A Retrospective

Ismail

THE reformist aspect of the Indian romantic movement in Andhra was championed by Viresalingam Pantulu, while the creative aspect was splendidly moulded by Gurazada Appa Rao. The latter reacted against the classical mould of Telugu poetry. He brought about a change both in theme and diction. The classical *grandhika* vocabulary was jettisoned in favour of spoken Telugu. The rigid classical metres were replaced by the mellifluent native rhythms. As for the themes he picked up, they were as fresh as the dew on the early morning grass. Thus he showed the way to successive generations of Telugu poets.

Among the Telugu romantics Krishna Sastri (*Krishna Paksham*) stands out, embodying in himself a fine sensibility and genuine passion. His sensibility permeates both his art and life, erasing the boundary between the two. For him the poem was a vital experience, and life acquired the intensity of poetry. His *Urvasi* (1928) is a quest for the ideal beloved, whom he at last discovers in his creative self. She reconciles for him the contradictions of life, like love and desire, separation and unity, pain and pleasure.

Telugu romantics celebrated frustrated love of the Petrarchan kind. For them the beloved is a dream-figure, for ever unattainable, and only to be worshipped from afar. Among the noted Telugu romantic poets are Rayaprelu Subbarao, Abbesri Ramakrishnarao, Naduri Subbarao, Vedule Satyanarayana Sastri and Nayani Subbarao.

In the 1930s there came the inevitable reaction against romantic poetry. At its vanguard was the dynamic personality of Srirangam Srinivasarao (Sri Sri). As soon as an art reaches the limits of its idiom, it is doomed to become moribund and hamper creative work. Sri Sri started writing in the romantic style, but soon realised that his earlier manner was inadequate to what he now had to say, for the reason that it had been invented by men whose creative experiences and ambitions were quite different from his own. So, the entire poetic diction had to undergo a seachange to express his psychological and social experience. He was attracted to both surrealism and com-

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munism, and after making a few experiments in the surrealist method, abandoned it and dedicated his creative talent in the service of the communist movement. His best work was written in the 30s and the 40s, after which his political obsession smothered his poetic spark. His *Maha Prasthanam*, containing his best poems, was published in 1948.

Another poet of the same era, who made splendid use of the reservoir of imagery thrown open by surrealism, was Narayana Babu.

The 1950s witnessed the hightide of the communist movement is Andhra, spewing out a spate of versifiers committed to communist ideology. They banded together under the name and style of 'Progressive Writers' and deluged the country with pale and stale imitations of Sri Sri. They so successfully browbeat the intelligentsia into accepting their view of poetic commitment that for two decades the 50s and the 60s, no poetry worth the name sprouted on the Andhra soil.

The time was ripe for reaction, but what ensued was something more violent and rabid. The 'Digambara poets' aim was to shock their readers into an awareness of their social apathy and personal degradation. They employed their purpose. Their poetry is but a part of a comprehensive show or happening, comprising, among other publicity gimmicks, demonstrations and getting their book inaugurated for example, by a riskshaw puller. Only two out of the six Digambara poets stand out for their creative contribution, Mahasvapna and Nagnamuni.

Some poets who were not part of the mainstream must be mentioned here. Visvanatha Satyanarayana, though he trod the romantic path in his early days, was not a romantic by temperament. He was a classicist, who by dint of erudition and craftmanship, attracted a large following.

Arudra showed a great promise in his earlier poems (*Paila Pachchisu*), but later his talents were diverted into the dreary sands of historical scholarship. Another remarkable poet was Bairagi, whose poems expressed existential angst.

Two poets of eminence who made a mark on the literary scene must be mentioned here. Balagangadhara Tilak embodied in himself both the romantic spirit and the disposition for social concern, and produced mellifluous and free-flowing verse that endeared him to a large readership. The other is Ajanta, whose poems flash violent images of alienation and existential absurdity.

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Two poets who have achieved renown, especially in academic circles, are Narayana Reddi and Dasarathi, who combined classical ease and clarity with romantic harmony. Here I must mention Kundurti and Bapu Reddi, both gifted poets, the former a champion of vers libre.

In the 60s the communist party split, giving rise to fissures in the political writers' camp. Those of the deeper hue banded together with Sri Sri at the head and formed the 'Revolutionary Writers Association.' However, this did not improve the quality of their verse, the only thing that distinguished them from the Progressive Writers being their strident tone and advocacy of violence. The only meritorious poets who stand out among these are Siva Reddi and Sivasagar. The former, mainly influenced by Pablo Neruda, employed vivid imagery to convey his burning emotions. The latter made use of popular folk modes to weave stirring songs about the hill people.

A wholesome reaction to three decades of inane and repetitious political poetry came at least at the end of 60s with what was at first facetiously called *Anubhuti Kavitvam* or poetry of experience. Srikanta Sarma, Mohan Prasad and Ismail were in the vanguard of this movement, which strictly speaking was not a movement, but parallel progression on diverse paths. For them the poem is a crucible of emotion and intellect, striving to close the gap between words and experience. Srikanta Sarma, a student of Sanskrit studies, combined modern sensibility with classical poise. Mohan Prasad vibrates with fine feeling to the variegated impressions of the world. A shade of existential melancholy pervades his poems. His later poetry tends to be more and more self-involving, making deep dives into the sub-conscious. Ismail aims at an expression of the most personal kind of experience an authentic statement of what he sees and knows, suffers and loves, his responses to the things, relationships and heightened instances of his life. He takes some object of everyday nature—a tree, a bird or a flower—as the central image aroun1 which to organise a poem meant to illustrate some fact of human experience.

Another poet who made a mark in the 70s in Seshendra Sarma who interfused classical learning with a fine talent for inventing symbols to convey his personal as well as social consciousness.

Here mention must be made of another strand in the modern Telugu poetic fabric. This is the Hindu-consciousness and traditionalism which was championed by Visvanatha Satyanarayana

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in the 20s and the 30s. This was carried on in the 70s and the 80s by two competent poets, Suprasannacharya and Jagannatham.

With the 1980s came a fresh flood of sparkling poetry, that had three undercurrents. One was the sense of frustration and disorder conveyed by Ajanta, the second is the inwardness and melancholy of Mohan Prasad, the third is the fusion of feeling and image, leading to the closure of the gap between words and experience is Ismail's poetry. The three strands may be found entwined in different measures and patterns in each poet's work.

Here I may list some competent young poets. 'Smile' combines fine sensibility with a sense of wonder. Godavari Sarma is a dexterous craftsman with an ebullient sense of life, Raoof and Sikhamani are two promising poets with finely honed perceptivity. So also are Vasira and Narsa Reddi. China Veerabhardrudu's poems are pervaded with existential angst. Afsar, Srinivas, Yakoob and Penna have already made a mark, and they have a long and bright future before them. Two vivacious poets with feministic susceptibility are the two Nirmalas, Kondepudi and Ghantasala. Another poet with a finely tuned antenna is Patanjali Sastri. Much is expected of Chandan Rao, Kandalai, Uday Bhaskar and Gudihalam.

It is indeed time to rejoice that Telugu poetry has come out of the miasma of communist propagandist fatuities into the fresh and exhilarating air of free thought and imagination. □

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TELUGU SHORT STORY: NEW DIRECTIONS

Vakati Panduranga Rao

ANY study or review of modern Telugu fiction is beset with two powerful constraints; one is that of the sheer numbers for none can say with a straight face that he or she has read all the stories and novels published during a given period. The second obstacle is one's own mental framework. I plead guilty that my attempt to present an overview of some of the recent Telugu stories suffers from both these handicaps.

There may be equally good or even better stuff than what I am presenting here; so mere non-mention here should not be taken as a reflecting on the quality or utility of these stories and novels.

Another point that need to be made is that a whole lot of self-promoted writers, sponsored writers, so-called writers employing ghost writers by the contract method or the monthly-wage method and their voluminous outpourings are given in this survey as the only attention they deserve that is total rejection.

Woman kind forms half of mankind and yet we live, behave and create our literature as if it is only for men, of men and by men. With the spread of education and adult franchise the woman of today refuses to be the doormat. Mother she is willing to be; an affectionate companion she is ready to be—but a slave she refuses to be. Man (I use the word to mean the male of the species) in his unwisdom is yet to become fully reconciled with the emerging and emancipating woman. Consequently, we have friction sometimes subtle, sometimes loud because men and women have been made to live together. A whole lot of uncomfortable, if at times aggressive questions are being asked and Telugu literature can proudly claim it does reflect this trend in a distinct manner. If the modern women poets open up their hearts through their verses we have the story writers like Volga and novelists like Are Padmaja Choudhary using their respective pens to disturb the slumber of the society on these sensitive issues.

Politicis and social action are one thing and literature and creativity another. Volga in her rather unimaginatively titled collection of stories—*Rajakeeya Kathalu* (March 1993) argues the case of the oppres-

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sed female with the passion of dedicated lawyer but after reading the stories one is left with the impression of having attended a meeting. The disturbance that is the hallmark of a really creative pen does not occur. This is not to say the writer has not written exquisitely at places. A piece from the story—'Aarthi'

> "The nurse brought the baby. As I gently touched the rosy soft cheeks of the boy my spine started melting.
> I looked at my own body and was astonished. What a power this body has! I knew at that instant What I was.
> In this act of creation my body did not contract, it has expanded. It became creation itself.
> ... Not only did I create the baby but I was able to produce milk for the baby. How great is my body

If this is the ecstasy of being a woman—at the other end of the spectrum she reflects on the agony when she says—"We are not mothers but cows. We are not sisters but buffaloes. We are not wives but pigs. We are not angels but fields."

She terms marriage as 'a business in which women are robbed of their rightful share of profits in the name of love, chastity and maternity' (story 'Pelli').

Because of the repetitiveness of the theme, Volga's stories in their collected form have an air of monotony but her creative abilities are perfect in stories like 'Godalu' and 'Bhadrata' where the theme is presented with a touch of artistry.

It is interesting to note that the same theme is dealt with much more artistry by P. Satyavathi in her story 'Illu Alakagaana' (Katha-90 volume-1992) and Are Padmaja Choudhary in her novel *Nalugu Godala Baita* (1992).

While good intentions are excellent as starting points for any creative activity, they do not carry the creative process itself further. This dictum surfaces to one's mind as one wades patiently through Ketu Viswanatha Reddy's laboriously written pieces in his anthology (1991). But Reddy's innate creativity and seething anger shows itself in the story—'Koolina buruzu' dealing with the villages and their politics of today.

The very same theme of exploitation by the powerful sections of the society that often surfaces in Viswanatha Reddy's stories appears again in 'Raatilo Tema' (1993) by the ink-scarred veteran

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Madhurantakam Rajaram. The title itself teaches a thousand lessons in the subtle art of choosing a title for a creative work. The hard dry-looking stone too can have a spot of softness inside where one may even find water, suggests the title. The master-craftsman that he is Rajaram builds up the theme like a Bade Gulam Ali Khan building up his Megh-Malhar, ever so gently and by the time you are through the story you are left wondering about things unsaid rather than the ones said—a hall mark of superlative creativity.

In this story the oppressed class is found guilty of ravaging the fields of the village big-chief Reddy when their pigs had gone astray. The power of Reddy flexes its muscles and the poor fellows get beaten and their homes destroyed overnight. They come to Reddy's home to ask—now that they have had their punishment would he mind if they continue to live in the village or would he that they migrate.

But the very act of their coming to Reddy's home is taken as a provocative defiance. When the battered, hungry, emaciated bodies droop, the normally reticent Lady of the Reddy house intervens on their behalf only to be rebuffed imperiously by Reddy who admonishes her—'If you interfere now you will have to settle it.' The quiet lady accepts the challenge and asks the servant to get those old unused huge rice-cooking pots going on the ovens. When the servant asks—'Why Ammagaru, are we expecting any guests?' she smiles and replies—'They have already arrived.'

They are those wretched bodies lying half dead in front of her home. Stung by her action, the better part in the cruel Reddy is awakened and he takes it on himself to prove that he can beat her at her game as well by ordering homes to be built for those people in his land with his materials.

A story that would have made Mahatma Gandhi weep with joy, 'Raatilo Tema' powerfully suggests that the future of mankind is love and sharing and not in power and guns. The charm of Rajaram is his perfect merging of the two streams of the story—the tenuous relationship, between the rulling couple and the social relationships between the ruler and the ruled.

Senior administrator Phanikumar's *Godavari Gaathalu* (1989) contains anecdotes that show how dedicated officers can bring about social and economic change, without sloganeering or pamphleteering parading as literature.

In Vaarala Krishna Murthi's anthology *Devara Dunna* (1993) the

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story 'Viluvalu' tells of a middle class gent who goes back on his word regarding a marriage alliance on account of financial reasons finds rebuffed by a roadside fruitseller who chooses to have respect for her own words than money. 'Jeevandhara' tracing the travails of the flat-dwellers in a water starved city in an utterly delightful affair.

'Kuwait Savitramma' by Chakra Venu had almost become a by-word for the gulf-money syndrome. Venu has a natural and unassuming way of exposing the hollowness of middle-class morality.

Bandi Narayana Swamy who writes under the pen name of 'Sri Swamy' has been consistent in giving us meaningful stories; with each story the writer seems to be evolving higher and higher. In 'Saavu Koodu' he depicted the meaningless expenditure involved in the rituals after the death of a person, who when alive could not get a decent meal. His next story 'Vaana Raale' (1992) showed the travails of the Anantapur farmer who is cheated by nature and man, rains play truant and the businessman plays false and yet the emaciated farmer looks forward to the next season. It is the secret of the relationship between man and nature that surfaces in Swamy's story 'Irusu' (1993) in a more evolved form. The Hero of the story stands on a hill in his village to which he has returned after a long interval. The village is the same and also not. His old buddies are very much there but changed, what is it that I have come seeking—he asks himself. "The only link between me and the village are memories. But which is the fulcrum for the changes? What is the axis for memories?" asks the author whose journey inwards has started and on the day he is able to strike a relationship and a balance between the external that keeps changing and the internal that is the real—probably the questions will cease and he will find that the answer and himself are not two but one ...

It is the same metaphysical Swamy that we see in (1992) 'Padmapaadam' and 'Ardam' where he uses mirror as a metaphor reminding us a Adisankara's lines from 'Dakshinamoorthi Stotram' *Viswam Darpana Drusya Maana negaram:* boom comes the echo from the sciences

> "Science itself is a looking glass—the flowing, swirling universe is a mirror ... when we see into the glass we see wondrous things ... a mixture of fantasy and physicist metaphor ... reality and something else ..."
>
> David Peatre in his book *Looking Glass Universe* (1984).

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This only proves that if only one is sincere to one's innermost self (Unswayed by the preachers and literary activists) one is sure through his own art to arrive at the same point which has long ago been proposed by Indian Philosophy and now confirmed by the western sciences. Swamy nonetheless stands very much on the terra firma when dealing with his people and their problems. He can be devastating with his biting wit as when he says—'How can you expect civilised behaviour from one who does not have a pot of water to drink?' in his story 'Neellu.'

Come to the rich land of Munipalle Raju's many-hued stories and you are in a world overwhelming experiences, strong and sensitive personalities; laughter and sorrow, strengths and foibles mingle in a chokingly grand fusion to make every single story of Raju an experience worth savouring again and again.

If Madhurantakam Rajaram presents his men in all their simplicity and strength Raju's men come out full of colour and vitality. A man who has seen life in all its grand variety Munipalle Raju brings to his stories rich material, sensitive portrayals and a flurry of pithy descriptions. He can with a few deft stokes paint a real good portrait.

In 'Saroja' dealing with the relationships between an artist and his model—both of whom are at the starvation level the final sentence— 'This is the meaning of art—is it?' Indicates that compassion is the royal road to man's opening up. His 'Savati Tammudu' explores in a masterly fashion the parallels between the lives of Russian film's heroine and the hero of the story. 'Yasoda Koduku' and 'Raagam Neeamb-ari' are experiences to be savoured and not to be reviewed in so many words.

M.V.S.R. Murthy ('Swathi' and 'Netra Ranjani') is that rare artist among story writers with a classic style and thematic variety. Srivalli Radhika through her very first story 'Chanduvu' (1993) heralds the arrival of a new talent. Nagaraju Gandham 'Gheruvu' (1993) represents the new generation writer aware of the blessings of environment and the perils of its pollution. The de-humanization as a result of urbanization portrayed by Dasari Amarendra in his story 'Brataka Nervani Vaadu' (1993) points to the efflorescence of the Telugu fiction in another healthy direction. Chilukuri Devaputra shows a similar sensitivity in his 'Ekaki nowka Chappudu' (1993) where sons and daughters of a dying man want him to die in time to enable them to return, to their far away places of work before their leave expires. Vallure Sivaprasad in his 'Is Mittise Tilak Karo' focusses on the psychological desertification of the Indians settled in foreign coun-

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tries where they long for the scent of the soil of their motherland.

The sheer thematic variety attempted by Telugu writers despite sustained efforts, (subtle and not so subtle) by the socio-political brain-washers of the leftist hue-shows that the Telugu story is ready to march into new green pastures.

True, themes alone do not make a writer good, true some of these writers are yet to achieve that elusive integration between the content and the style—but the fact remains that the Telugu story writers are as good as any other in the world and as Rajaram rightly observed in a speech two years ago—'The Telugu novel has sold itself to the cinema, Telugu drama is more absent than present but the Telugu story is very much there, sound in its base and strong in playing its dutiful role vis-a-vis the society.' □

[Excerpted from a longer paper presented at Telugu University]

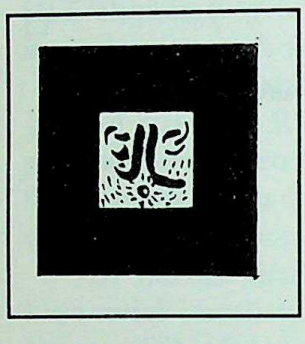
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Telugu

REALISTIC PORTRAYAL OF LIFE

J. Bhagyalakshmi



Madhurantakam Rajaram Kathalu (Short Stories) by Madhurantakam Rajaram, Visalandhra Publishing House, 1991, pp. 460, Rs. 65

MADHURANTAKAM Rajaram has been contributing to Telugu literature for more than four decades. He left no genre of literature untouched. He writes novels, plays, poems, essays and lyrics besides short stories. Yet he is more well-known as a short story writer. The author himself once said, "I am a short story writer ... it is in the short story that I could find out my medium for expression. It overwhelmed me by completely occupying my consciousness. It made me laugh. It haunted me and taunted me. It also made me shed tears ... I was in ecstasy when I realised that a writer could successfully communicate his impression as intensely as he experienced to the reader."

Madhurantakam Rajaram is adept at realistic portrayal of life. He comes from Rayalaseema in Andhra Pradesh which has its own identity. There the lifestyle is different, especially of the village folk, who are naive, down to earth, loving, caring yet bearing the burden of poverty as stoically as they can. Their hard life with its day to day problems has not hardened their attitudes and perceptions. All these aspects and many other nuances get reflected in *Madhurantakam Rajaram Kathalu* which won the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1993.

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The book contains 40 short stories written over a period of four decades. They truly represent the range of Rajaram's canvas. Here every story has its place, its identity, its message and adds colour to the kaleidoscopic view of life that emerges out of the volume. The characters we come across in his stories are ordinary people we see in our everyday life. They are convincing and realistic and help us have an insight into human nature because of the magic touch of the author. Madhurantakam Rajaram's stories are purposeful and they have subtle message which only the discerning readers can discover; their author is never blantantly didactic. As a writer he firmly believes that literature should denounce the bad and uphold the good. He says, "Literature may not be strong enough to transform the society. But it can infuse the spirit needed into the public which can provoke a marvellous revolution of ideas. It can also describe an Utopia which is the goal for the humanity."

The author confines his stories to middle class or lower middle class. He depicts life as he sees it in its various hues and dimensions. He prefers first person narration in many of the stories perhaps to bring the story nearer to the reader. In certain cases he uses Rayalaseema dialect just to give the story its right flavour.

Madhurantakam Rajaram as a writer comments on people's weaknesses, strengths, noble and mean qualities and hard realities. He gives an overview of life without any pretension of self-righteousness. In its citation Sahitya Akademi says that *Madhurantakam Rajaram Kathalu* is recognised as a masterpiece of Indian short fiction in Telugu "for its faithful delineation of the outer and inner life of the rustic folk, its proper employment of dialect, its total comprehension of social and existential reality and its directness and force of narration."

The language and presentation of Rajaram are so inimitable that they acquire a character of their own. All pervasive flavour of Rayalaseema and intrinsic naturalness reminds one of the fragrance of the wet earth, newly-cut grass and the gurgle of a brook.

EXCERPT

I stopped a rickshaw and said "Hotel Ellora."
Within a few minutes the rickshaw stopped near the hotel.
I entered the hotel.

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I had a feeling that the man at the counter looked at me with a particular attention. I know it is natural for any proprietor to look at a new customer. So I didn't pay any heed. I stood near the counter and asked, "What do you charge for the meals here?" I was about to open my purse when the man at the counter held my hand tightly. "After a long time, Ram Babu. I am Saththiraju. Just look up," he said. I did not know how to respond, how to express my surprise. I stood motionless, staring at that person "Hey Chitti, bring that chair for the master." He stood up and made me sit in the chair. "Go, bring some *badamkhir* (almond pudding)" ordered Saththiraju.

I emptied the glass and said "I was indeed stunned, but this drink has a very cooling effect." Saththiraju laughed. I understood that his laughter was a prelude to a volley of questions he would subject me to.

I told him all the details about myself. When his turn came he took me to the interior part of the hotel. "Do you think the walls have no ears here?" I asked. Saththiraju laughed louder. "No worry. Everyone knows about me here. But when it comes to narration I pretend as if it were a secret. What actually happened was ..."
(Then Saththiraju narrated how as an unemployed youth he started as a server in the hotel, won the confidence of the proprietor and how he ended up marrying the ugly daughter of the hotel owner.)

He pressed the calling bell and summoned the head waiter. "Bring a plantain leaf. Serve special meals to the master." "What about you?" I asked. "First, let me honour my guest. The host can wait ..."

Eyeing the dishes served on the leaf I said, "There seems to be a similarity between our two lives, Saththiraju. I joined the military force and you are running a military hotel."

"Then show your military valour on the food."

He got the dishes served again and again and strictly supervised my eating. "Eat this, why don't you? Taste that one. Why have you not touched this? You finish that item first ..."

When I returned after washing my hands I saw the table had been cleared. There was a plate in front of Saththiraju and a small paper packet. The waiter came with a small dish of sambar.

Saththiraju opened the packet which contained a piece of chapathi. "This is all for my food. I am supposed to eat with sambar in which salt and chillies are minimal. Eating more than this is danger-

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ous to my own life, say the doctors. So, in sum, the matter is I derive my satisfaction by watching those who enjoy a sumptuous meal .." Saththiraju smiled—a smile that looked as pale as the paper flowers which were hanging at the entrance. □

Translated by J. Bhagyalakshmi

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INDIGENOUS POST MODERNISM

D. Kesava Rao

Down to the Earth : An anthology of Post-Modern Telugu Poetry, Compiled and Edited by Seelavi and Kundurti Satya Murty, Freevers Front, Hyderabad, 1994, pp 98, Rs. 60.

THERE is a common complaint that not much of Telugu poetry (as also fiction) gets into English, though the quantum of work produced (in both genres) is by no means small. Searching for the reasons may not be an edifying exercise, but, hopefully, a band of translators would appear in future to fill the gap. One of the earliest renderings into English was perhaps made by Adibhatla Narayana Dasu. His long poem (*Kavya*), "Bātasāri", probably written in 1888, was published with a prose rendering.

Sri Sri translated his own and others poems which later appeared in a book form. A. Varada Rajeswara Rao and A. Chaya Devi also brought out an anthology of Modern Telugu poetry. In 1979, V. Mohan Prasad published a collection, *This Tense Time*, a very ambitious work with translations done by several hands. Gunturu Seshendra Sarma brought out bilingual editions of his poems, rendered into English by Indira Devi. S.S. Prabhakara Rao brought out in book form translations of the poems of a few individual poets. And now Freeverse Front, a literary organisation, has brought out this anthology.

The sub-title of the book claims that this is an anthology of Post-Modern Telugu poetry. It is doubtful whether categories like Modernism and Post-Modernism are applicable to Telugu poetry, for it is derived directly from the socio-economic conditions of the area rather than from the Western models. Romanticism of the early

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20's was, of course, derivative, but the later movements, except for the general, broad, Marxist outlook, were totally native. For that reason, Telugu poetry (as well as fiction) is earthy, steeped in the roots of the soil. Chekuri Rama Rao, who writes a foreword to this anthology and who has been instrumental in fostering contemporary Telugu poetry by maintaining a healthy literary discussion, through his weekly column, has labelled the period after the 80s 'post-modern' but in an entirely contextualised manner :

> Though the period from 1980 is designated 'Post-Modern', it cannot be equated with the usage in Western literature ... The main characteristic of this poetry is a sincere effort for aesthetic excellence without sacrificing their (i.e. the poets') ideological tones or positions.

If we for the moment ignore Romantic poetry, the later movements used poetry for social/attitudinal changes, and so the exhortatory or sometimes the pontificatory tone of the poems is part of the poetic practice, for the poet is still expected to do his legislatory function. Into this scene, subtle yet perceptible changes have gradually set in the practice of writing poetry. From that point of view, some of these poems can be compared with the Western forms. The lines from Vegunta Mohan Prasad's poem

> From now not the least Cannabis Sativa neither the
> Strife of desire nor the struggle of liberation
> Now no need of Analgesia Anesthesia and
> You wouldn't care Anthesis Now that you are
> Thanatos you conquered pain of you and yours
> Your soul singing sweet songs
>
> (Art of Death, p22)

articulate a very complex response to the problem of life and death: pastiche and juxtaposition, without unifying different segments of experience into a coherent utterance—elements that can be identified as being in the contemporary mode. Ajanta, likewise, weaves intricate patterns of thought with flashes of realistic insights :

> Just with a push of button, can your index finger turn into a revolver?
> You're conversing with fire.
> This is a world filled with men in disguise,
> All wear masks,
> masks for words, masks for thoughts.

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The real face hidden by a false one.

(Computer Pictures, p. 14)

Ismail, on the other hand, uses a style that is spare and precise, offering surprisingly new levels of experience :

In the golden afternoons
the Vassanar opens its verdant heart
to the prancing buggies—
and the reins are held by
Van Gogh's ear.

Out of the ear also emerge
the convoluted canals of Amsterdam,
plaiting lights and shades
into a flowing harmony.

(Van Gogh's Ear, p. 16)

K. Siva Reddy explores the world of words in relation to human condition with a deep visceral feeling :

Just as a word takes root in man,
man too takes root in words.
The body bears word-fruits
sends out word-arrows.

Touch my body,
you will be ignited, electrified.
A touch of this body
will touch you,
move you to revolt.

(Body, p. 20)

Varavara Rao, for whom poetry is an instrument of social change, writes about an activist unjustly killed, universalising the event into a condemnation of injustice :

They feared
a single drop of your blood, if shed,
will sprout into a rain drop.
Hardened by any number of blows
that left not trace
your body administered a shock
to those
who thought they hung you

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to an electric transformer
in the *chowrastha*
as a warning of death to all.

(Body, p. 24)

Feminism, as elsewhere, became a dominant feature in the period following the 80's. Again, feminism here is not derivative, rooted as it is in the repression that women suffer in our country. Their voices, therefore, are authentic and matter-of-fact :

We have the flesh: no heart, no brain.
We are the fun-giving commodities of coerced coitus
and the efficient machines

We are scantily-dressed fashion models
exposing ourselves in public.
After all we are females with two breasts and a cunt

(Beware, 'The Naked Parade', p. 32)

That is Vimala articulating the agony of Everywoman. Kondepudi Nirmala too brings out the pathos in the life of a woman.

Forty poets are included in this collection. Some of them, like Randhi Somaraju, Nagnamuni, Nikhileswar, Indrganti Srikanta Sarma, Addepalli Ramamohana Rao and Jwalamukhi are represented by poems that do justice to their reputations. Quite a few younger poets are represented too and it is refreshing to read their poems which are even technically superior, while they also voice their authentic feelings. If there is a flaw, that is the plethora of printing errors in the book. Some rigorous editorial work would also have prevented some minor blemishes from sneaking into the book. While this cannot be lauded as a very satisfying attempt, it has at least paved the way for a better attempt which presupposes proper coordination and planning. □

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A Judicious Compilation

E. Nageswara Rao

VARADA SMRITHI. Eds: Abburi Chaya Devi, Seela Veerraju, Kundurthi Satyamurthi, Abburi Trust, Price: Rs. 200/-

ABBURI Varada Rajeswarara Rao, known as Varada to his friends and admirers, is a familiar name to those associated with Telugu literature, theatre, journalism, publishing houses, and political movemenets in the last fifty years in Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere. The movements he started, the books he wrote, the volumes he compiled and the anthologies he edited are many. His two recent books, *Varada Kālam* and *Kavana Kuthūhalam* present the important events and prominent people in different walks of life in the last half of this century. In the seventy years of his life Varada worked in various places in several jobs. He endeared himself to scores of people. National leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, great poets like Chellapilla Veñkata Sāstry, philosophers like Rādhākrishnan and linguists like Emeneau were personally known to him. He travelled widely in India, the U.S.A., the U.K. and the former Soviet Union.

The wide experience he gained in several fields, the friendships he made with important persons, the dedication with which he led different movements and the zeal with which he promoted various institutions are all significant in the literary and cultural history of our land. Varada's is indeed a multi-faceted personality. More importantly, he is a great conversationalist. For his ready wit and sparkling humour, he is likened to Oscar Wilde.

Varada Smrithi is a unique book of nearly 600 pages depicting the important events of his life. But it is not a conventional biography; it is not an autobiography either. In line with Varada's penchant for experimentation in whatever he did, this book also adopts an innovative method in biography. It is a new experiment combining the techniques of the two genres. Interesting extracts from his writings and letters written by him and to him are included. The opinions of Varada's contemporaries, friends and reviewers find an appropriate place. In addition to his own reminiscences, the recollections of others

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on his life and work are arranged in a chronological order. The articles by his wife, Chaya Devi, and a class-fellow, Rāchakonda Viswanātha Sāstry, provide a number of fascinating sidelights on his personality.

This is useful as a source book for researchers engaged in the study of Telugu authors and the origin and growth of several literary and other movements. There are interesting accounts of the founding of such organisations as the State Sāhitya Akademi and Nātya Gōshti. A very valuable part of this book is the last section in which Varada's unpublished writings in English and Telugu are included. Among the other interesting features are facsimile reproductions of a few pages from his prison diary and letters from prominent poets like Sri Sri. The book is also profusely illustrated with photographs covering the entire span of his life.

As a son of Abburi Ramakrishna Rao, a pioneer in modern Telugu literature, as an associate of M.N. Roy, the revolutionary intellectual, as a confidant of Sri Sri, a path-finder in modern Telugu poetry, as a class fellow of Rāchakonda Viswanātha Sāstry, a noted short story writer and as a colleague of K. Īswara Dutt, a prominent editor, Varada lived when history was in the making and he lived an exciting life. As a record of the memories of and reflections on such a man's life, writings and activities, this book is bound to be of great value to students of literature. It is of absorbing interest to the general reader also. □

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IN THEIR OWN VOICE

Srinivas Rayaprol

Neeli Meghalu (Poems), Pub. Asmitha, Secundrabad, pp. 264, 1992

THIS is an anthology of 92 poems written by 31 women poets brought out in a handsome publication by Asmitha, a feminist group from Secundrabad in Andhra Pradesh. The youngest Anjana was born in 1972 and the eldest Abburi Chaya Devi in 1933. A majority of the writers are of the Post-Independence era and most of the poems are written after 1980.

Most of the poems in this volume speak against Man who humiliated women over the years, used them, played with their bodies and minds and left them permanently damaged. See some samples :

They sit in their easy-chairs
and drool over my problems
They feast on the food I make
and dismiss my world as wholly
of my own making ...
Between the frying pan and the fire
between putting the baby to bed
and setting my house in order
Always at war with this world
That haunts me
from the kitchen to the Grave.

From the Kitchen to the Grave (Jayaprabha)

Because I have no more blood to give you
Because I have no time to spare for you
Because your sister has yet to find her feet
I have had to say no to your being

Abortion Statement (P. Rajani)

Much of what is written is not only for the emancipation of women but also for the eradication of Man and what he stands for in society. In many cases the suffering which they face at the hands of men turns into a hatred of Man.

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Is this a Hell on Earth
Or the Earth in Hell
Like viewing on 3-D
It is enough to step inside
The labour Room
To remember ...
While Jasmines in the hair
White sari on the body
White milk in the glass
On the beside table :
You can see it all
as in a picture frame

Labour Room (K. Nirmala)

Some of the poems are equally effective in their brevity and understatement

In my childhood
I was happy to be
the mother of my doll.
Now, I am mother,
I am Doll.

Mother-Doll (Anjana)

Mother says
you are a girl
you have to be married
you are a fear lurking in my heart

Father says
You want to get married?
Poor girl
It isn't that easy

The friend says
I swear by the Sun and the Moon
You are my salvation
Marriage is not the aim
Our love is

Society says
You are a woman,
you cannot cross the line
Once you are soiled
The stain will not go.

Have you Heard (*Abburi Chaya Devi*)

Many incidents of recent times have inspired these poems. The ill-treatment of prostitutes in the Mehndi in Hyderabad, the killing

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of girl babies in Rajasthan, the gang rape in the Dadar Express and the countless happenings that take place every day in every home in this country, where women are taken for granted and accepted as a necessary adjunct for procreation and furtherance of the human race.

In the introduction Vasantha Kannabiran, a leader of the feminist movement in Andhra states :

"We are old people, young ones, strong ones and weakling, intelligent and moronic, men and women walking side by side, picking stones from the path, building bridges across streams that come across us, driving away the cruel animals that cross our path, to find a way ..." Though there have been occasional women writers in the past, it is a moot point why there have not been enough or significant women writers in the past few centuries. The subject of freedom of women and their rights is a subject of a little over half a century. Even in the West against the countless male writers, only a few, have produced significant work. Even though there were a few women writers in Telugu like Tarigonda Venkamamba, Tallapragada Viswasundararamma, Kondapalli Koteswaramma and Chavali Bangaramma in the past, this volume for the first time proves that women's writing has come to stay and is a force to reckon with by any standards.

But often this anthology speaks for women not as a distinct sex that has been created to serve a purpose in this world that we live in, but as a downtrodden, much mutilated human being forever insulted by the other sex. The intensity with which the poems are written sparks off an instant reaction in the reader, who while reading them is transported into that same irrational world of which the poet is speaking. The sameness of these poems however destroys the individuality of the poets. I feel that the poetic voice should prevail over the proclamations, and this is confirmed by Volga who is one of the more virulent voices of the movement who has this to say,

In the infinite blue sky
hiding their heaviness within
Carefree, light-headed,
Seemingly without purpose
these blue clouds that wander
Till suddenly without warning,
Gathering darkness and strength
Stormy with thunder and rain
the cloudburst reaches the Earth
Like a sheet of water that flows
To flower the wilderness
And sustain the living.

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BOOKS

KATHA PRIZE STORIES, Vol. 4 Ed. Geeta Dharmarajan: Rupa & Co. 1994: pp. 272; Rs. 170. This is the fourth volume in the Katha Prize Stories whose volumes have already acquired great prestige and popularity as representative annual anthologies of Indian short fiction in careful translation. This volume presents 17 excellent stories from 13 Indian languages including English. The editor in her preface observes: "To translate ourselves any form of English we have today seems grossly inadequate. The only way we can change this is by creating our own English—an English that can and will accommodate all that we Indians want to say in a way that we want to say it."

THE NARRATOR, Makarand Paranjape: Rupa & Co, 1995: pp. 282; Rs. 95. This is the first attempt at novel by Makarand Paranjape, poet, critic and short story writer. The novel deals with the life and fortunes of Rahul Patwardhan, a university lecturer haunted by his explosive and libidinous alter ego. His secure middle class existence is shattered after his meeting with Badrinath Dhanda who exploits his creative schizophrenia to the full in enlisting his collaboration in writing a story for a Hindi film. In the process Rahul's marital life also suffers a few shocks. The novel grows more exciting as the life in the film and real life begin to penetrate each other. The narrative technique is innovative and the theme, unconventional.

FIRST LIGHT IN COLONELPURA, Manju Kak: Penguin, 1994; pp. 196; Rs. 100. Manju Kak, who has been writing fascinating short stories in periodicals has come out with her first novel. The well-written narrative presents the story of two households, one traditional Hindu and the other Anglo-Indian, both of which are forced to face the dilemmas of the new social order. Their attempts to hold on to the old world fail as the village of Colonelpura undergoes a quiet but relentless metamorphosis reflected in every aspect of

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the life of the youth: from dress codes to moral codes.

POST CARDS FROM GOD, Imtiaz Dharkar: Viking Penguin: 1994; pp. 103, Rs. 100. Imtiaz Dharker is the youngest member of a group of Indian poet-painters that includes, among others, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Gieve Patel and G.R. Santosh. This book, conceived in the wake of the Bombay blasts of 1993, tries to reach out through drawings as well as poems, to those disturbed by the growth of aggressive communalism of various hues in India. The poet's compassion for the deprived and the uprooted lends a rare intensity to these poems of despair and love.

NEGRO COUPLE IN SEARCH OF SIVA, Atulananda Goswami: B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi: 1994; pp. 134, Rs. 80. Atulananda Goswami is easily one of the best fiction writers of Assam today. The stories in this collection narrate and reflect on the tragic experiences of ordinary men and women caught in situations from which there is no escape.

IN CUSTODY, Anita Desai: Penguin: 1994; pp. 204, Rs. 125. This new novel by Anita Desai narrates the strange tale of an encounter between Deven, a polite and self-effacing lecturer in a little-known college in Mirpore and the famous Urdu poet Nur, who, to Deven's dismay, is now a senile old man drained of all his genius.

THE THROTTLED STREET AND OTHER STORIES, Gangadhar Gadgil: Focus Books, Popular Prakashan; 1994 pp. 168; Rs. 85. Gangadhar Gadgil who has been writing fiction now for about 25 years is considered one of the pioneers of the new short story in Marathi literature. In these stories he breaks free of the conventional patterns of short story. The stories are like passing interludes in the ongoing struggle of life. Translated by the author, the stories reveal his uncanny understanding of human nature and its foibles.

EAST, WEST, Salman Rushdie: Jonathan Cape, London: pp. 216, £9.99. Salman Rushdie's first collection of short stories, *EAST-WEST* brings together nine fascinating tales in three sections, 'East', 'West' and 'East, West'. The stories are dense, tender, tragic and comic at the same time, refusing to choose between East and West preferring to it the joys and tensions of a dual existence. Rushdie in his usual vein mixes reality with fantasy, history with gossip, murderous intrigues with black humour as he steers a narrative course between intimacy and distance.

THE LEGENDS OF KHASAK, O.V. Vijayan: Penguin India, pp. 208, Rs. 125. This is the author's own translation of *Khasakkinte Itihasam,* a break-through in Malayalam fiction. The silver jubilee of its publication was celebrated in Kerala recently with the release of special issues of

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journals and collections of studies. The novel mixes myth and reality to weave a tale on the border of dream, a tale that is as erotic as it is metaphysical. The strength of the novel really lies in its rich, metaphoric idiom, its fine sense of humour and its undercurrent of local mythology.

CIRCUMFERENCES, Suma Josson: Penguin, 1994, pp. 210, Rs. 100. Suma Josson, poet and film-maker narrates in this first novel of hers the passionate story of Sarala who is married off to a businessman against her wishes. She tries her best to sustain the marriage despite her resentment, but fails in the end and decides to walk out after nine years. The story of her love with K. before marriage and his return to her life later, forms the subtext of the novel that reinforces the events in the maintext.

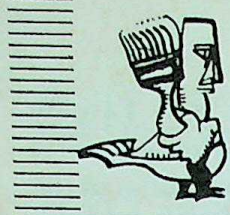
THE BOY WHO TALKED TO TREES, Yaswant Chittal: Penguin, 1995, Rs. 100. Ably translated by Padma Ramachandra Sharma and Ramachandra Sharma, this collection of Kannada stories by Yaswant Chittal is remarkable for its sparse prose and its intense narration of the tales of the dispossessed and dislocated. The author is obsessed with evil, desire, decay and death and has a special ability to create an atmosphere of terror and helplessness. He is equally adept at portraying rural communities and urban masses as these stories set at times in Karnataka villages and at times in Bombay reveal.

LOOKING THROUGH GLASS, Mukul Kesavan: Ravi Dayal, Rs. 190. A rare picaresque of ambitious dimensions, this first novel by Mukul Kesavan has already been taken note of by critics and readers. The novel is especially noteworthy for its inspired and energetic prose that places him in the company of the masters of Indian fiction in English. Its play with time, the magic of its narration, and its awareness of Indian communities makes it a remarkable debut.

□

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On Indian Writing in English

"Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag : speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies." (Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, P. 23)

IT may seem strange that Indian writing in English continues to be a bone of contention in the Indian literary world even today, even after several of its writers have won national and international acclaim. Many writers and critics in the other Indian languages seem to believe either that it is impossible for Indians to do creative writing in English since it is an alien language whose cultural register and verbal associations are simply inaccessible to us or that such writing is illegitimate as it smacks of colonial elitism and does not address any specific language-community in India. They argue that it is rootless and devoid of any specific identity as it is neither a part of English literature nor of Indian literature. According to these detractors-whose list includes great names like Buddha Dev Bose and S.H. Vatsyayan—Indian writing in English is primarily urban, middle-class and Western-oriented and thus fails to reflect the real India with its rural ethos and native traditions. Genuine literature, according to them, can be written only in the mother tongue.

True, Indian writers in English in their

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anxiety to defend themselves have at times made untenable claims like that theirs is the only pan-Indian literature after the exhaustion of the hegemony of Sanskrit and, partly, of Persian literatures. Such claims obviously do not take into their account of 'India' the underprivileged who have no access to English, let alone the majority that is still outside the bounds of literacy itself. Yet there are quite a few valid reasons to consider Indian writing in English relevant and legitimate, reasons that have already been put forward by scholars and writers from Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand to Shashi Deshpande and B. Kachru. They could, with some risk of simplification, be summed up for the sake of this argument: *One* : India is the third largest English using nation after the USA and the UK which had about 35 million users of the language. This is about 5 per cent of India's population which is larger than the percentage of the users of certain scheduled languages of the constitution. *Two* : English has the status of an 'associate' official language in the constitution. *Three* : It is the state language of four states and of most of the Union territories. *Four* : India has a large net work of English print media with a pan-Indian circulation and is one of the world's three major book publishers in English. *Five* : English happens to be, even if we desire otherwise, the primary language of interregional interaction in India and of course of India's interaction with the outside world. *Six* : English is fast getting assimilated into Indian languages while also assimilating them. India has given English its own cultural identity that has little to do with its Judeo-Christian tradition. Along with the Sanskrit and Persian traditions, English also has entered India's linguistic and literary creativity. A common world of concepts, beliefs, rituals, attitudes and even words and phrases is shared, say, by a Kannada novel like Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* and an Indian novel in English like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. This is not mere thematic parallelism; experimentation in English has to be viewed from the point of view of bilingual creativity, Indian English writers bring into the very fabric of their writing a lot of what they have learnt from the Indian languages they know—rhythms, syntax, concepts, even words. This bilingual creativity is not new to Indian literature; it is very much there in the whole tradition, as for example in the poets of the Bhakti Movement. English, in this context, is decolonised through a nativisation of the theme, space and time, a change of canon from the Western to the Indian, a cohesive use of the discoursal devices of the other languages of the writer—like native metaphors, similes, proverbs, quotations, speech-acts, culturally appropriate styles—even transliterations of conversations done in the Indian tongue—and narrative models like *sthalapurana* (eg. *Kanthapura*) of

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Nama (eg. *The Trotter-Nama*) or *Mahabharata* (eg. *The Great Indian Novel*). *Seven* : English literature and translations, into English, of European works have had a profound impact on Indian creativity in all languages, contributing genres, modes, attitudes, sensibilities and points-of-view. *Eight* : The charge of elitism can also be levelled against literatures in other Indian languages, since our people are mostly illiterate and since elitism also consists in the style and technique used and not only in the language chosen. *Nine* : To dismiss the 20 percent of Indians who live in the cities as 'unreal' is dishonest: urban reality is also part of the Indian reality and urban readership is part of the Indian readership. *Ten* : The best Indian English literary works have as many readers in the country as the best books in Indian languages, and at times even more.

Indeed, to be writing in English and to be Indian is a great challenge to creativity. Raja Rao is aware of it when he says, "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own that spirit that is one's own ... We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us ... The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression even as the tempo of American or Irish life has gone into the making of theirs ... and our paths are paths interminable ... We tell one interminable tale ... This was and still is the ordinary style of our story telling." Even writers like Vikram Seth, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Amitav Ghosh or Salman Rushdie, who do not conceptualize like this, unconsciously share the same credo.

This defence of the possibility of Indian English writing needs not blind us to its risks and limitations. Shashi Deshpande in a recent article warns: "It is wrong to pit English writing against the whole of regional writing; how can we compare a part with the whole? How can you put a literature that is over a thousand years against one that is scarcely 100 years old and only just finding its true voice? ... I hold no brief for English writing—there's plenty wrong with it: from the deliberate flattening of differences to an ignoring of social realities, from an inability to grapple with local issues to a tendency to 'present' or 'explain' India. And there's the recent obnoxious capacity to inflate itself, a consequence of being projected by the English, and therefore the national, media ... Above all there is a failure of criticism to put this writing where it belongs, in its right context, relating it instead to literature with which it has nothing in

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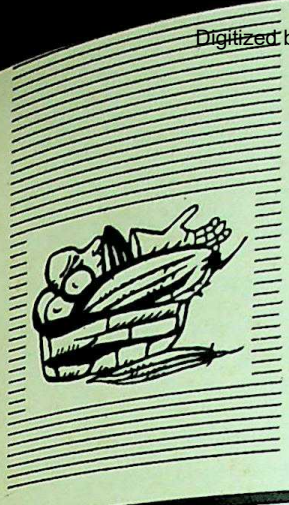
common except the language."

Sahitya Akademi's attitude, of considering English as just another legitimate literary language of India, I maintain, is the most appropriate attitude that we can have towards English as a language of creativity. It is no more and no less important than any other Indian language, and being the youngest of them all, with all the uncertainty and immaturity that goes with it, deserves our patient, if critical, attention rather than our outright condemnation.

It is true that it is difficult for the Indian writer in English to play on the associations of words or to make use of the kind of rich cultural register available for the writers in other Indian languages, to convey that 'spirit of one's own' Raja Rao speaks of. It calls for a thorough decolonisation of English, a total recreation that infuses English with our native perceptions, memories, experiences and speech-rhythms : a task that is especially difficult for those formally trained in Queen's English, yet so well done by Black writers in Africa as well as the United States. The truth is that the 'post-colonised'—to use Simon During's category—cannot hope to retrieve the 'pristine purity' of the languages before they were affected by English, nor can the 'post-coloniser' hope to jettison or museumify Indian languages with their great creative traditions that are often twenty centuries old. True, English is to a great extent the language of the new power-elite in India, but here we are speaking of a politics of language that rests not on the power within the language, the power of the rhetoric, but on the power behind language. When it comes to power within the language, which is more relevant to a discussion of creative writing, traditional Indian languages with thousands of years of imaginative use in the country have a definite advantage over English that yet has to stammer and struggle on the margins of India's vast and various literary landscape.

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IN MEMORIAM

Shakti Chattopadhyay
(1933-1995)

ON MY BIRTHDAY

I got some flowers on my birthday.
In the midst of
Tremendous joy and mirth and songs
A cat, alone, stepped up
The stairs, counting fiftytwo paws
Spiral iron stairs, up the stairs
Without anybody noticing, up the black stairs.
Only I had noticed
His uncertain pose
His pensive mood.

I got some flowers on my birthday
They have withered now.

THE BEST PART OF MY BODY

Snow has spread over the best part of my body.
Life somehow breathes in the rest
Life means just to move hands and feet
Snow has spread over the best part of my body.
Denied escape, I am left invalid
So that ants cannot eat me up, or
Cannot drag me out by the legs.

I'm just lying down, with my palms outstretched
Have to get something before I leave, I know.

A DAY FOLLOWS ANOTHER

A day follows another
Dusk draws on.
I, leaving home, am seated on the grass
In the terminal garden
I've come upon the yard

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Leaving home.

The home is strewn with white sheafs
No scribbles on them
No words have built, within, either,

A palace.
I place my palm on a tree
On the leaves, flowers
Like, in my young days
On the hair of a lass
On her ribbons, hairpins
Like this
A day follows
Another.

EPITAPH

He died human, after enjoying
Comforts for some time, he was
A poet, was but a beggar, very much.
Publishers arranged a carnival on his death
Because, since he is gone, they were relieved.
He won't bother them once again.
He wouldn't come, after dusk, a well-dressed dandy
And claim, Give me money—or
Everything shall be overturned, treasury ransacked
Give me money, quick—else I'll set fire
To your homes.

But he himself burned to death—a poet, and but a beggar.

DEATH

A pyre of logs was burning in the cremetorium
I'd love to burn out, O I'd love to.
I want to burn out by some riverside.

Because, a time may come, may come
When fire by riverside becomes insufferable
And the corpse may ask
For a thimbleful of water.

Death is no success, no success, then.

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TO THE UNTIMELY DEATH OF THE OLD, BELOVED HUSBAND

You had lived through fiftyone hard times
In hybernation, couldn't help the end.
Knowing I wouldn't stand the vanquished figure
I didn't try at all
To move, step by step,
Along the extensive corridor.

No point in going, either,
What fame would I have achieved
By this latest disease?
It is love that pardons the folly of love,
You did.

You had said, I understand.
The grisly teeth of agony will have deranged some day
Got to be. Will perish,
Will no longer remain functional.
Therefore ...

TO ENTER THE FOREST

There's no preordained time to enter the forest
You can enter the forest any time.
Whether to collect leaves, or to hack with an axe
There's always a cordial invitation to enter the forest.
Ever walked in the forest with the moon?
Ever seen the moon lacerated
by the hacksaw of leaves?
The moon is lying on the hillock like a football
The match is due at dead of night, there
will be jubilations—
You can enter the forest at such moments.

I MUST ESCAPE FROM PERSPECTIVE

I must escape from perspective—now it's noon
Now a train leaves the station
'Won't you go to Arab?'
I must escape from perspective—how is Arab?
Is there a stationmaster? Is there a waning lantern?
You only play on organ bewildered

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The moon vigilant on all sides
Camp, barbed wire
This is my chance to escape
This is my chance to escape

ONLY MAN CAN

Humiliation has filled the cup of harmony.
Ignorance leads us to assume
That harmony is the calm master of all life
Ignorance leads us to assume
That harmony
Is poised at the heart of all songs
Humiliation had filled the cup of harmony.

Only man can purge the air from pollution
Only man can
Extend life beyond life.
Only man can restore
Harmony in the outer world
By rinsing off the venom within
Only man can purge the air from pollution.

WHEN ONE OVEN DIES OUT

When one oven dies out, you must light up
Another, if you believe in life.
When one star blossoms, the sullenness of light
Spreads all over the sky.
In the darkness of sleep between two stars
By the suggestion of life
The great cremation ground of void
Has awakened time and again
In the night that purges nescience.

Translated from Bengali by Samir Sengupta

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Harbhajan Singh won the Saraswati Samman this year

Harbhajan Singh

THE BRASS HORSE

Just in the middle of the great plaza
There was this brass horse
Riding on the back of this horse
Was an ancient ruler
Whose name I do not know nor does the horse

Yesterday there was a flambeau procession
Passed through crossing
Following which was a caravan of innards
Children skewered to bayonets
And then deadly silence

The brass horse was utterly shaken
For a long way echoed his neighing
Leaping a fiery gallop
Plucked off from stone all four hoofs
Flew straight ahead like a spear
Shaking off from form back
The ruler of ancient times
The mad horse
Ran through the streets all day and night
And neighed like flames
Unreigned without a rider
There was something he would've liked to say
But who would listen to a horse?
Those sleeping on the roadside
Did not awake
Those awake inside
Did not emerge

But the horse is mad
Babbles again and again
I have paid the price
Whatever it be for a bare back

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Does one have to pay
Even for rider on the back
Are all denizens of this town
Still made of brass
One who wants to ride my back
Must mount today
For who knows weeds
May sprout here tomorrow.

BEFORE PARTING

Whoever comes into this world
Somehow must depart
Part in the earth part in the winds
And some into the flame shall merge

Whatever sweetens the breeze tomorrow
Shall have a part of me
I would also be a part of that
Which gives a pang to the heart

The sun that has risen today
Shall again rise tomorrow
One who is called up during broad day
Shall babble in the sleep

Whatever was inscribed on the brow
You are trying to erase
And whatever you wrote on the back
Who is going to erase?

Burning like fire is agonising
To be put out burning is much more
From one grief to another is my place
Who shall redeem me from that place

I had the taste of life on earth
Now I have to live by tongues
May distantly related words thrive
That shall perpetuate me by their tongues.

A SMALL PLATE OF RICE

Every evening in our neighbourhood
Sweet rice is cooked

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As soon as the sun goes down
The sounds of cooking rice is heard
And there is a tender tingling in our noses
Every evening we wait
That today too a small plate of rice
Will be sent for our little one

Every night the exiled neighbours
Return to their home
In the rusted padlock
The key turns with a screech
We hear the sound of open lock fall
Sound of hands in the sink
Sound of beds dragged along the floor
Sound of ladle in the pan
Smacks and sound of licking fingers
We hear
All this is done in hurry
For they know
Another spell of exile
Would come any time
Even then satiated with sweet rice
They can fall asleep
The sound of their snoring
Doesn't let me sleep
The dying embers in their hearth
Like sounds reach across to us

Then all that is repeated
Of which we are afraid each day
In the deep dark night
A loud trenchant cry
Goes through our street
We're afraid the flame may not
Jump the wall into our house
No

The flame has again jumped our neighbour's wall
And goes into their yard

Again the same dragging shifting
The same furore again
Same goings-on in the street

Those rice-eaters who'd returned home

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Are being thrown out again
The same exile begins once again
And again though I'm home
Playacting as though I am not
I open the door and go out in the street
The desire to watch last time
The exiled neighbours
Besides the wisdom of not peeping outdoors

Because we did not meet
Our exiled at parting time
They come back home again
And again the're exiled
And each time we

At the parting time
Just miss
Meeting them

But they don't the rice-eaters
Nor does waiting tire
That from that house
Today too a small plate of rice
For our little one will surely come.

INTEFADA

At the corner of this street
There is no place for our rendezvous
The people have all come out of their houses
The speaking of the rabble
Has turned into babble

Inside the houses
There is a strange eerie silence
The wind meandering in the rooms
Is like snakes o'er sand
Quiet
Stark like a girl
Scare of assault
One's own self seems stranger here
If we decide secretly to meet in a house
The fear is
That the quiet shall startle

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Thief! thief! it shall cry out
No, there is no place for us to meet

There's Intefada in the streets
we started off with a hope
That on the other corner of the street
There'll be place for us to meet
There'll be words for us to understand
And we set out in a hurry
To reach the other end of the street

Words like stones hurled toward us
Went whistling by the ears
Catapulted words
Crazed our temple
And left behind trails
Of burning flames on the wind
The bitter smoke of words choking within

It was decided
We shall throw ourselves
At the stones bullets and flambeaux
No stopping
Either we shall reach a place
Where we can meet
Or be for ever free
From perplexity
Of not being able to meet

On reaching the other end
We shall not take stock of injury-marks
On each other's body
The speechless lumps
Or the screaming wounds
It is enough
for each other's faith
That we walked together
The path of Intefada

We found out at the other end
That there's a street
Beyond Intefada
Then more and yet more
Everywhere our people

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Have come out of their houses
Those who haven't emerged
Are strangers aliens
Stark naked
Afraid of assault

Passing through street by street
We shall go across the whole city
Going through city after city
We shall leave the world behind

No we just have to walk today
To go through the Intefada
With just a mite of hope
That there must be a place for us to meet
Some where
Some words will relate to us

Words cooking on the fire
Like fragrance wafting from cooking rice
Shall say to us maybe
Shall say:
Come take us off the fire simmering
Come, you desirous of meeting
Long have you been waited

As yet
At this corner of street
There is no place for us to meet.

THE COW

Everyday a cow passes by
From the front of my house
Gives me wan timorous look
She'd like to say something
She has but silence in place of words
And for long I have forgotten
The art of understanding silence
Conditioned by the din around
Strange seems my own silence
The enemy
That goads me on to forbidden deeds

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A rope hangs from round her neck
Dangling it sweeps the ground
Even the rope seems to say something
And its language too is silence
Has she broken loose her tether
Or has she worn it willingly
That someone may get hold of her
And be her master
The pity of her state is
That I'm scared of taking hold of the rope
A known gentleman
How can I tether in my yard a stranger's cow

She goes ambling on
And I ruminate:
Cow is the earth? Cow is the poor?
Has a tongue but speechless?
The language of the poor speechless cow
In some past incarnation I did understand
If I did have that gift sometime

I seem to have lost it somehow
The gift I've forgotten and lost
I shall not rekindle today
Some other time maybe
I was human sometime
Stretched over the whole creation
Now I am merely a gentleman
Shrunken to my own self

That cow comes walking again today
Same as ever wan listless and mute
Sweeping her rope
She wants to say something to me
Will I like to pay attention even today?
Why should I alone be asked this question?
Let the cow pass today
Whether or not to hear the cow
We shall decide tomorrow.

THE RIVER IS DYING

The river is dying out

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The level of tears is sinking
The quagmire beneath has begun to show
You can neither swim nor drown in it
The river is dying out

Sohni shall turn back
Sadly from the banks
When she finds no way
To reach her Mehiwal
Shall learn to live with her misalliance
They shall not believe then
Before ballad celebrated love
It pulsated in real life
The river is dying out
Those who thrived with rivers as friends
Shall drift without moorings
When they find a strip of sand
In place of flowing river

Who shall believe
That once there was God
And godlike people too
Sitting beside flowing rivers
Conversed with one another
The river is dying out

Slung over the brambly Babool
The river out of the village
Wrung drop by drop is oozing and dying out
Like the shrunken sleeve of a shirt
Drying on the terrace wall
The river is dying out

I am searching a river
In the land of rivers
I search the eyes of each one I meet
And look into the hearts of my people
Look for it within myself
Probe into the deep recesses
In my thirst
And get stony silence in reply
Words withdraw before they open lips
The river is dying out.

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WALL

Some place rises a wall
Softly unawares unseen
Caresses the flesh as noiseless
As the winter sun
Like tip-toeing arrival of death
Causing no apprehension
And yet surely rising is the wall

Last time when I met you
I wonder if I reached you
With all the walls about me
For echoes of my wall
Rang along with my voice
And did not realise then
That you too spoke from behind walls
And now that I know
What is it but the rising wall
Softly unawares unseen
Religion is wall
Wall the country
And wall too the language
My opinion of myself
My views about you
And yours too about yourself
About me and about the world
Are all but walls

Ground cannot be levelled
By just razing these walls
The path that leads to union
Is also the way from separation
A crumbling wall is also a wall rising

The vows we made the other day
Were walls we raised
And by them we shall abide
From behind them accost the world
Or else fall silent speechless
You and I shall draw closer ever
And ever apart from them all
Afraid to demolish the walls

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Shall live with the walls
with the walls shall die
But ever surrounded by the walls

Once again around the sun today
has risen a wall
That shall mount steadily
Higher and higher until noon
The sun shall decline and set
The wall shall not decline
The wall shall not vanish

There's a wall rising somewhere
Softly unawares unseen.

SOMEONE PEEKS

Someone seems to be peeking
Walls of the house have holes in it
Holes in this my mould
Ensconced deep within me too
He is spied by someone

I met you in my dreams
There was none besides you and me
I said all those things to you

That man to a woman has ever said
You too gladly lapped it up
But throttled your joy with your lips
Placed your hand on my mouth to stay
And whispering said
There's someone watching

At early dawn
With doors and eyes closed, lights put out
I lie bogged in somnolence
Busy linking broken dreams
There's nobody but me
Yet an echo rises from wells within
Beware, all alert
There's someone watching

One who spies too is being spied
And the one who's shy of watching.

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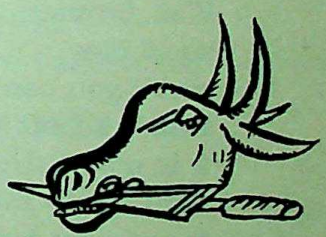
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Because there's someone watching

In a crowd or in solitude
In presence or aside
There's an eye ever lidless for me
Yet forbids from saying
Hesitating I continue
and spy at things so worthy
And when I see nothing around
I still cast an eye around
Lest someone should still be there who peeks

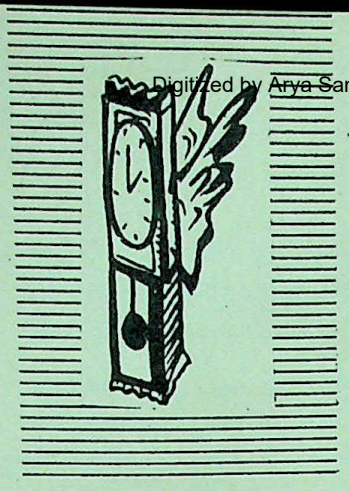
How shall I be undressed in limbs
And be chaste for you
How indeed can you rise unabashed for me
Created for each other
We shy away each from th'other
There is someone who peeps.

Translated from Punjabi by S.C. Narula



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Joy Goswami

TO THE REMOTEST STAR I SPEAK

I have come through plague and pestilence,
Threaten me not.
I happen to know all the tender leaves reminiscent of soft hands
all the sleeping flowers as precious as diamonds and jewels,
the needles that prick the finger, and the blood-stained designs.
Yes, I know the demon that dwells in a timid fellow.
Quake after quake I have crossed.
Who cares for your blood-shot eyes?

I know, as well, the mother takes the babe in her arms,
but tears roll along the streets,
People crowd in the Garment shops and shoe shops
and now in the Umbrella store
polluted drinking water and fruits in pieces surround us,
and the business shops spray raw liqour
in front of their premises quite early in the morning.
No water.
Well, brothers and comrades, better go back to your local squabbles
and if you can, write to me now and then.
Please accept my love and good wishes.
It is not so that I did not give you any,
Yet I salute the radiant sunbeams-
the radiant face, the glowing body
Oh, Cosmos! My beloved clouds and rains,
my adored sun!

All of you are the songs of a strange city
and, me, the musical instrument
Well, let me know what you mean when you say
this is a drum and that is a brass

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Are these all meant for earning one's bread?
Or, are they meant for pouring out my music? What do you say?
People always shout that they are all wrought.
Well, so am I.
It matters little if you believe it or not.
But, look, beyond all our beliefs and disbeliefs
there is the broad Sun, a blade of grass that has just started
flying on its new born wings
and I happen to know the births of all wings
the births of butter-flies,
the wrangles and scuffles of magpies, yes, I know.
I have walked through the fields of *udad* plants
and pierced through the woods and thorn-jungles.
Beneath my restless feet there grew so many roads
and at the end of those roads
new zones sprang up.

Look, I dwell in this habitat, but, mind,
I have not travelled the long distance
simply because I have a mind to set up
a Cathedral or a town, well, no,
I have sauntered along even in the foul weather
only to repair the damaged roof and to start life anew.

Because I know perfectly well how the sky itself hangs
below a rope-ladder
and how swaying into the air, floating over it,
I submerge into the void.
The very next moment, truly, I ascend the back of the Moon.
The more I ascend, the colder the wind grows,
I exhale ice that accumulates gradually in my hair and beard,
and how fortunate I am that just at this point of time
a girl welcomes me to the Land of the Moon.
and endearingly names me the Magic-old-man-the white old man.

Immediately after this, I proceed running over a huge,
long shining tongue
and descend into its sloping, dark throat,
I peep at its stomach inside, where
the bones of dead beasts
the bones of dead birds
the bones of dead trees
the bones of dead cities

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slowly turn into coal, slowly transgress into oil.
I proceed running over the huge, long, shining tongue
and descend into its sloping throat—the face
that resembles a cave, shuts its grotto with a bang and
I get fixed to its throat. The moment it sneezes,
I come out through its nostrils, walk on its eyebrows, oscillate
conceal myself, and play hide and seek from its thick beard.
Nobody can reach me. None can touch.
No giant or demon can harm me either.

II

Even now I have not told you how the women are.
Nor how many times they picked me up
from the streets; ransacked and procured my scattered fragments
from the four corners
after I had exploded and thereafter sowed me
throughout the fields like versatile seeds.
And, this is how I could so miraculously emerge before your dazed
eyes as a blade of grass amidst a tract of grass.

Even so, I have not yet unveiled what I exactly did
as I landed on the Moon.
Yes, in the very beginning I set up a tent,
then I dug up a ditch in the floor;
next the girl who welcomed me and I got into the ditch
and fell asleep, but it was so terribly cold there that
even our eyelids froze.
The fractions of moments—moment, nay, the Time itself froze
Finally, for survival, we entered willy-nilly into one another's heart.

And the heat came into being slowly
Slowly the heat began radiating like smoke
from our joined hearts—then, a little lamp
began to burn in the tent.
Not for a single moment did the flame tremble
as the land of the Moon is shorn of wind.

Ever since then I have declared the end of all coldness,
and that is what I ought to have done, I have touched all the
forecasts, I have placed my fingers at the zenith of all
apprehensions, and diverted them towards delight.
It is true that you could never see all these.

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But did I ever conceal my kisses?

Do you know that this hand—this hand of mine stores a mammoth patience?

Do you know how unaccountably these two eyes, the eyes
of mine, can withstand waitings galore?
Can you ever guess the number of beauties and baths
my body knows of?
But still there was a time when a spell of prolonged
moments found my lips rubbing themselves
against the dust just for a single kiss.

I do not answer your queries, I get
immersed in my own silence. Do you know why?
Because you have never desired to see how
the streets change sides in their sleep, and how
they talk in dreams. Many times I have slept
by the street, been a street's brother.
In the jungles I stood immobilized, being the brother
of trees and plants. As the bonfire broke out,
I became embers while standing, without muttering a word,
but I did not blend with the wind, being ashes.
Nor did I fly above, being dust,
because I knew the fire only scorched my stem
but root remained intact.
It was after this that the tender green leaves grew
on my body; and, then, one day a sad bird came and sat
on my branch. She then touched my leaf hesitatingly
and addressed me with a faltering voice,
'Listen, Oh tree!'
'Yes.' I quipped.
Then she asked, 'Did I awake you?'
'No. What have you got to say?' I said.
She asks me again, 'Can you guess who I am?'

With my closed eyes I replied, 'Oh, certainly,
you are the radiant girl.'
That very moment my plant-life came to an end
Those terrible waitings, looking over the streets,
were over and I was
absolved of the punishment for standing erect
centuries after centuries, I jumped over the ground
and the girl, clasping my hands, began to run and

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crossed the roads, the rivers, the meadows.
Thus both of us vanished into the horizon.

III

Once I awoke in an ocean.
Once I kept myself floating on its water.
From afar, I looked like a boat, capsized.
Someone thought, it was a hill swimming the backstroke.
Then gradually some leaves and creepers began
to grow on it by twos and threes,
and they thought at best it was an island emerging all on a sudden.
But none even cared to think that I was alive.
Oh, my radiant girl, you were the only exception.
Only you realized that there was an ever-fresh heart in me
and that the heart could mould all its
green blood into a fountain and give it to you
the very moment you desired so.
This is precisely why one night I stretched
my hands out over that ocean, and you too,
your hands towards mine over the water
from the other continent.
Thus they were united. We could not see each other's face,
but our fingers discovered one another in embrace
and began to caress one another madly.
The fingers made silent soliloquies
like the blind who communicate through touch
I could recognise each one of your fingers.
I christened them individually.
Do you remember that I called your forefinger 'Canton',
your ring finger, 'the pine leaf',
and the youngest finger 'quarrel' —
Today, when I have virtually become an enormous
island out of accumulated soil,
and the population on my back is not negligible
when they consider my climate adequately congenial to my health
when new tourists call on me,
and new ships anchor by my shore,
I dip my face into the soil at night
and call out: oh my radiant girl!
Where are you now?
Do you hear me?

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Do you love me yet?
But seldom do I remain an infirm and immobile island
or a mere object of tourists' curiosity.
I take a sudden plunge and at once come out on the surface
sputtering, and, then, drift along floating,
while tossing and moving the surges of the
ocean, and this I do all the while clutching
the waves of your call.
I leave the water and blend with the city-people unnoticed.
Next my radiant girl, I follow your fragrance
and I can, of course, locate the odour
even among the crowd of thousands; yes, I know
where you dwell, and identify each mole on your
body studying the stars.

You ask me: Where is my land?
Where should I dwell?
I enter the river and pull out an island
over my back and decide this should be your land.
Then I fix my two arms as poles on both sides
and over this, hang a piece of sky as the roof,
and the very next moment I cover the shed with
the leaves and creepers of my written and unwritten poems
so that you do not catch cold in your sleep.

Usually I return home late at night
and find that everyone has gone to bed.
leaving no food for me and then
I do not know where you are, but I address you,
saying, "Do you know I don't have my supper tonight?"
Late at night I return home and ensure that
my kittens have slept well in the packing box.
Then I do not know where you are, but I address you,
saying,—"Listen, my radiant girl,
They have grown up a little."

A handsome prince in jeans laughs at me
and asks—"Well, do you write love poems?
Who is the poet of love?
The jeans-clad prince proudly shows me a row of trees
and declares—"Look, I had my first kiss under that tree
my second under that one, and the third
under that ..."

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With a robust laugh, he adds, "I am never short of
amorous affairs in the world."
Then dazzling princes and princesses scoff at me
and demand—"Well, please prove what love means."
In such moments, my radiant girl, I feel impelled
to call you. How much I long to conceal my face from
this earth with the help of your palms!

'Is it because I am frail?
Do you, like all else despise the weak?
Speak out—say something!
For I cannot believe that my radiant
girl doesn't exist at all.'

IV

When everyone is asleep, all the night I
ascend a straight cliff.
Through the night I bear the Sun on my shoulders,
bringing him from dark and bottomless pit, and
I place him in the east from behind the cliff too.
Who but me paints the sky crimson at that moment?
You enjoy the much-talked-about sunrise from
a distance, and you rush headlong to offer me a handful of curses
I do not jump down, take a turn, or immerse in the air.
I stand undaunted and all your weapons and curses
fall at my feet to change into a small river that flows by.
Plague and pestilence I have been through,
don't threaten my pigment and brush.
I know all the sleeping palms and the tender
flowers as priceless as diamonds and jewels.
I know the volcano that vomits after three thousand years.
I know the love in a monstress
I have jumped over innumerable abysses,
I composed countless lyrics.
I stand erect at night and kiss the Moon.
The sea-waters wash my feet.
Threaten me not.
Because you do not know as yet that
drought dries the land, and you yourselves
burn all the crops with fires and radioactives,
when nothing but ashes remains as your food,
I stealthily put my face into the soil

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and solioquise—"Oh, my radiant girl,
do you hear me? I have named your breasts
Anasuya and Priyamvada—the
friends who always accompany you.
Do they remember me? Do they still
wake up in anticipation of my touch?
Oh, my radiant girl, do you still
wake up for me?
Speak out, I pray"

Immediately after this, in the lowest strata
of the subterrain, two nipples of the Earth
wake up, her breasts swell up, the breast milk
oozes overflowing, and the milk rises
like a fountain quite imperceptibly
in the underground—milk, milk everywhere ...
The next dawn, quite magically,
all the dry land on earth gets wet, even the
deserts get wet. Simultaneously, fertility
gets up from slumber, and millions of off-shoots
conquer the grounds in a hurricane. Paddy-fields
abound in swinging stalks.

But, do I ever throw any counter-question to you?
No, never do I ask you to prove
the slumber of the wind.
I never demand: "Prove the existence of the
stars lying beneath Sleep. Or, drink the thunder,
fly the trees. Be seated upon the clouds
and swing your legs."
No, never do I demand these.
Only on stormy nights I take out my backbone
and instal it in the earth like a sleek column,
and on this I bear the brunt of thunder after thunder
through the night so that my village does not suffer a damage
or no harm is done to my radiant girl.

Mind it, I have already told you that
oneday I stretched out my hand over the ocean
towards a hand advancing from the opposite
direction—didn't I tell you so?
Today when you frequently send the radioactive
with a light on its face, and a winged

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radioactive as well from the end of the ocean
to the other end, and when the giants of fire
leap up over the cities, and when you spread
petroleum over the seas, and the shores clutter
with dying and dead birds with twisted and
broken wings, and when a mother stares at
her baby in arms, you hardly
realise that this mother is none but the
radiant girl and the child, me.

Better stick to your ethics and ideologies,
your arms and onslaughts—I don't care a fig for them.
Listlessly, I use my brush on all the shores
and feel relieved to discover how the birds
get back their healthy wings.
I send my song floating over the mother and her child.
I pour out my music from the pitcher, and am
relieved to find how all the wounds get
washed and healed by onrushing water-how
the mother once again runs along the beach
with her child and how they are born anew.

V

Last night, late at night, when every one fell asleep,
I stood alone on the shore. Water washed my feet,
and I raised my head to address the remotest star.

"Oh, my radiant girl, I was born, I was
born exclusively for you.
It was only for you that I removed
thousands of surges from above my head
to come out floating." And I added "I am
the first life on earth. None came before me,
remember this, remember, it was only for
you that I created so many forests
with trees of infinite variety.
I set the river in motion in hamlets,
I let the fountains drop from every hill. And
all these I do only for you, my radiant girl.
Not only the sky, but, by the banks of ponds,
rivers and by the sea-shores as well I arrange
for the multi-coloured bird sanctuaries.

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I keep the pools with cool water awake
in every desert—and the date-palm trees in rows.
Remember, I keep the cosy nests ready for families—
I ensure the existence of villages and thousands
of huts at the end of the deluge, and I keep drinking—
water and refreshment ready for travellers on every road,
and the taverns as well.
I ensure destination and shelter at the end of every journey."

And, then. I address the remotest star in the sky
and ask, "Well, then, is it
only me who won't have any shelter?
Throughout the day causing rains from the clouds,
painting the sky with so many colours, and
awakening crops in the fields—
flowers in the forests, reuniting hands with hands,
where should I return at the close of the day?
And, to whom? Who will fetch me towels and water?
Who will arrange my supper?
Who but you, my radiant girl,
will lull me to sleep?" □

Translated from Bengali by Pranesh Sarkar

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Amitabha Gupta

KRISHNADWAIPAYAN : THE POET

My only belongings are this burnt pot
and the broken plate
Hunger is my possession too
with all these I sit by the rhythm of the road

I am like a note of exclamation
in the ballad of the Mahabharata

Mother, give me a little scum.

IN THE TEMPLE

The evening was closing near as the Devadasi in jewels and gold
curved her fingers, rapped her feet. The tune was deep, she danced

From lands unknown many came to join in the seasons's festival
They found the doors of the temple closed.
Their sight was lost in darkness.

The traveller and the young Brahmin, the poet and the king
shook the temple with impatient knocking. Night deepened;
the hours of worship were being lost.

That was the time when five flowers jumped
into her sharpened palms
The priest was patient, and appeared indifferent,
lost in his everlasting dream

The dark hours of the night gradually melted into the moonlight.
The trees around grew silent.
Her glowing feet emitted music.
That was the only sound, heard or felt.

THE NAWAB AND THE BEGUM

The Nawab cannot always be expected. Only when
the roses are silent in the garden
when the waiting seems to be fragrant enough

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when the clock strikes the last pangs of darkness
He arrives, covering his erect body by a white robe

In the main room of the Harem
the night trembles like the flame of the silver-lamp
The incense-sticks are burning themselves away
The Begum is awake
By the mysteriously reddened screen, by the door
A slave is awakened too.

Now creeps the sound of the Nawab's feet
into the vast expanse of marble
Now the slave retires to a pillar, hands upon his throbbing heart.

THE BENGALI LANGUAGE

This language covers my sky
this is the embryo and the fire

At dawn, with no one else awake,
the wedding-signals
touch the chirping of children

I am the vermilion of her light
I am the lustre of her womb.

THE FALLEN MAN

The song of the cracked man
The song of the Fallen man
shall one day fill the air of this earth
on that day, after such a long and impatient waiting
human song shall spread like fire
they are now in the midst of
the limitless tides of the Kirtinasa.

The waves break. The river banks collapse
Yet the glows of life illuminate water, air and earth
Beyond the waves, beyond the tides
those who once had gone
Not all returned, but some of them shall
Come back: they will live
to reap and sow, live to see
the harvest of music that spreads like fire. □

Translated from Bengali by the Poet

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Debi Roy

THOUGHT

Don't think too much about your thoughts, there is no end to it
For thought had nothing ahead, nothing behind

Sometimes the sea swells up to touch the wind
And the wind reaches across to the sea

The finger caresses the words of the book and its pages
In deep intimacy how it goes on talking!

But here, this demonic greed! Won't it let the mind settle?
Anyone's?
Behind us, with bloody vigour how the sun
wants to turn its gaze aside!
Tearing through
the village's belly, the asphalt road,
Like dimming light
when the voltage drops, descends this all-encompassing dark,
wave after wave

TO GOODNESS, TO SIN

Sometimes, I examine
This goodness of mine
At other times, my stark sin
Tasting it on my tongue

How priceless is man
And how very priceless, fame

I am who I am
Why am I who I am
How far can Man fall
This same man who I am?

For nothing can be seen
In this disfigured looking glass!

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What city of mine is this
Where terror stalks day and night

Trying to see clearly, I sweat
Is he that thorough bastard!

THE FLAG

Distinct is the flag's importance.

Its nature and conduct
as though in a moment it can turn
the wind around

Distinct too, the party's importance!
Its walk ahead,
as though it were a lion
of hill and jungle! In a single roar

as though it can usher
thick, dark shadow
in the face of blinding sunlight

But can it really do that?

The cage only looks on, helpless
at that bird
flying away to the sky's pull

Translated from Bengali by Jayanta Mahapatra

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Ashis Sanyal

THE FOREST

The panicky birds' cry
Disrupts sleep.
The footsteps of deer
In darkness
Shake the stillness of the dreadful night.

The primal tigress searches
For her cub
The *chitrol-*
The hyenas all thirsty
Drink from
The silent lake
The only water to quench the thirst for blood.

The cleaver jackal
Licks up the corpse
of the women's breasts half-eaten by a lion.
Floats in the alarmed air-
As if from some naked blue corpse of the prostitute
Killed in the palace of Egypt.

At the sound of the owl
Fly far off
The cranes across a farther-off sea
Seeking
Another shelter.
In the darkness of the night
Spreads slowly
Just fear, a tiresome fear of the century.

TO MOTHER : A PRAYER

The entire land is floating in the water of agony.
Yet I stand here, Mother,

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To fetch light from your face to ignite my lamp.
As far as one can see
The river has gone far mending in a zigzag course,
Just like a pair of conchshells, Mother,
Around your holy hands immortal.

In your fearless voice echoes the voice of *Behula.*
To defeat death
Floating in the different stream of *Gangur*
You are sailing undaunted day and night
Through the wide water and tide
And promising that in every cottage
Every child of yours will live well fed everyday.

The hardcore of darkness flowing in the thick blood of my kinsmen
Is hurling incessant blows
And smashing a dreamy ivory tower in my consciousness.
Now, then, Mother,
Will you take different path in this encircling gloom?
Like *Behula* of old
Show us, Mother, the lighted path of life
That stretches before us all.

THIS TEARFUL LIVING

It is only for you
This tearful living
In darkness.
O Beautiful
The imaged glory of the infinite.

This living only for you
In despair
This weaving of the blue web
In the heart.
I am alive
Only for you
O beautiful

Only in the promise
Of giving you my all
In search of the immortal treasure
This endless journey
In the dark.

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Only for my love for you
For ever
This chosen tearful game of life.

Translated from Bengali by Amaresh Dutta



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Anjan Sen

DISCOURSES

Discourses tear asunder
What shall they speak
air pollutes smell of atoms
sentences infected
sentences get terribly stiffened
die stillborn grisly.
Now is a drought, epidemic of words now
and putrid becomes the borrowed culture

What will they speak
Words galore have already been said long ago
slender life and words.
Ascend O Vak!
I cerebrate a large plosion.

THE STRUCTURE

Time eternal emanates
All and entire Time
The ancient arms to appear
Fossils and antiquaria
The letters are taking shape
In the cauldron of lexis
The fireballs are shaping up
And their blaze
Metaphors in the making
A child is taking shape
All times are open
Immersion of the corpse in the dead river
Drifting through sluggishly.

The alphabet of Birth and Death. □

Translated from Bengali by Udaya Narayana Singh

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Chitra Lahiri

RAVAGED BLOSSOM

Ravaged blossom, woman alone
Cover your face.
The terraced grainfields are strewn
with the feathers of hummingbirds.
The finger-cymbals' last faint notes have sounded
In the bloodied vagina of the Maharani.
Now, in the inviting scent of the wind
There are no dreams.
The last ferry has drifted away,
The flow of fine words damped.
Drenched, your address had run in the drizzling rain.

Woman alone,
Within the mountain, burn your soul.
Lift your face to the glow of the bridal sunset-light.
The cloud that bends low
Over the leaf-sheltered shade of the forest
Is not yours.
Part of the West Wind has been stolen.
In the embryo
Scatter what is left.

Translated from Bengali by Paramita Banerjee and Arlene Zide

THE RAIN

It was raining this afternoon,
incessant erratic.
It was playing a music with its dripping sound
and breaking the same with discordant notes
that pierced the throbbing heart of the girl.

Her body was eager and hungry,

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wearied and smitten with passion.
The dancing shower caressed her body
as tender as of a female-bird.

Her soul like the bird was athirst for freedom.
A golden crown she had
but tied she was with a golden chain in her cage.
Drip-dropped the rain
in the whole of her existence,
Drip-drops the rain.

A DREAM

The flame of a star comes down on my grassy bed.
The garland glitters like the sharp teeth of the Sun.
The thighs and the moon-like navel of mine tremble with passion.
Stem the waves from the touch of the ardent tongue.
The empty garments lie afar.

The tiny grass-flowers remain awake
in the tender heat of the starry copulation
that limns a dream on my wearied body
scattered like torn petals of a blue-lotus.
The deep darkness of a black horse
spreads over my blossoming breasts.

Alas, o my child non-existent, o my baby unborn.
My dream of your first cry is like a drop of water on a lotus-leaf
and the whizz of a terrible snake is your lullaby.

A BLEEDING FLOWER

Neither am I a snow-doll
nor a woman unreal.
Having made me nude
you float me in a blood-stream,
Again it's you who pick me up
on a lonely shore.

You touch me with a golden stick to enliven me
and with a silver one to threaten me with death.

How my soul, behold, like a bleeding flower
is torn apart with a tender strike
and scattered on the wounded urban lawn.

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HUNGER

All over the night
pervade the bodily idioms
that bring about the message of hunger
and wake me up from the dreams.

The dear body, embellished with sun-shines
You blossom the flowers in a snowy land
and swim across the fiery tides.

The hunger comprehends the language of the ardent soul
and it's me who constitute this flow of hunger.

Translated from Bengali by the Poet



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Pratima Ray

WHISTLE

Sanajhure smiles standing alone.
Just now the century fell
Traceless are the house and moments
Hands of the clock floored.
Fraught with danger Picasso sees the embodiment of the universe.
The sun with a bowl of blood in hand
Trembles at the whistle of a morning bird.
Sanajhuri goes on laughing alone
on the execution ground.

WOMAN

In her body atoms overflow,
Eyes open wide after inserting a drop
of sunbeam in her fun.

A piece of saree of the milky way
flies in the murder of glassware slope

A dog licks an ultraviolet ray from
the cracked dead empty womb

Summon flies

PALOMA

In the light and shade
of the blackened green leaf
a pigeon moves around;
shaking her feathers: a multitude
on the crest of a wave
we gulp in cold muddy fragrance
A pigeon goes on rubbing its face
all over the silksoft body

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Wiping *holi*-powder from its back and neck
flapping its wings
the sun, now a pigeon, turns over the western horizon.

Translated from Bengali by Tusar Chowdhury



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Namita Chaudhuri

THAT SUNSHINE

The moment I open the eastern window
Every morning on my cot
Sunshine jumps like the white cat
Inside the room the more
I wish to keep the bedcover of dim light
Or to keep the temper of the dazed half-sleep of the morning alive
The more will the morning sun stand
In protest on the other side of the window

The more I redden my eyes
The more I scold—
Smiling fearlessly like a wanton boy
That sun will
Run away without notice.

Translated from Bengali by Rathindranath Chattopadhyay

YOU ALSO WOULD NOT DARE

I wish
Some of us could be prickly shrubs
We would know then how to conceal water
Within bodies—for future thirst—secretly

When the sand-storm dies
So that we would start growing up again
As if a morning
After a sleep in darkness

I wish
Some of us could be prickly shrubs
Then you also
would not dare to lay hands on our bodies.

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NOBODY WILL UTTER A WORD NOW

Nobody will utter a word now
Those who touched the corpse first in darkness
Those who awakened the neighbours before dawn
Have turned their back in silence
No identities of this dead
No information
Which party wrapped in which colour flag
A sheer dead body now
If at the morgue some colour gradually appears
Only then will some identification be made

Nobody will utter a word now
Now a sheer corpse
A dead body
Fallen on its face
With a deep wound in the chest

Translated from Bengali by Mihir Chakraborty

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Malay Patra

FIRE

I am burning, yet the fire dazzles my eyes
I am burning, yet the fire makes me giddy.

Outwardly my fettle is fine, my eyes are large and placid.
My personality is apparently benign, yet firm and ruthless.

Inwardly I am all aflame and I keep on adding fuel to the fire,
Not knowing from when I started burning within.

This fire is bewitching, can it be extinguished?
Let it burn, for it is my source of illumination.

BLOOD-STAINED HAND

Will you wash your blood-stained hand so soon?

On a stormy night the quiet forest trembles.
For it wants to stand intrepid in defiance of the storm.

Are you not moved by that resolute tremor?
There will be more bloodshed if you oppose.
Will you still wash your hands off?

Translated from Bengali by Jayadeep Mukherjee

HORSES

The terracotta horse of Bankura I have kept on display on the table-
Whoever rings the bell and enters,
For him it's a proof of my connoisseurship.
A showpiece merely, the horse remains stubbornly mute.

Nor would it stir, a work of art, it's there merely on display.
But there's another horse, its hoofs striking sparks of flame,

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It careers wildly along the many roads that stretch on.
We only wonder where the road it treads will lead him.

That horse is ever on a gallop, its locks of mane flung to the wind.
On all that we seek, on all our petty gains,
Its wild flight, manes surging in the wind, is somehow stamped.
If only we could, we would have vied with its speed.

Where ... tell me ... are the wheels that may withstand its speed?
Now suppose we straddle the horse itself,
Time speeds on, we too hold on to the reins,
Breathing sparks of flame as we do so.

Into our otherwise faltering tame lives it brings the taste of fire,
On the electronic ribbon sliding faster and faster
we shall thus have drafted a theme suited to the space-age,
But enough! Let's not indulge our dreams further
lest the office bosses

Who normally heap abuses on the clan of scribes who
dare venture out of bounds
Enter prejudicial remarks bearing on my job prospects.
Let then such wild gallops wait. Let me only place
The terracotta horse on the table.
Meanwhile if anybody rings the bell.

And enters, I'll put his knowledge of this art-form itself to the test.
I'll let our discussion range widely and lecture to him
on the value of tradition
And admonish him—Do lap up what I say, you fool!
Did the horse shake its head, did words escape its mute lips?

Translated from Bengali by Aniruddha Lahiri

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SUKRITAM

M.T. Vasudevan Nair

WITH the month of *Karkitakam*[1] coming to a close the skies cleared. By then we had given up all hopes of finding Cheriyatti.

It was at that time a woman's figure was seen trudging along the narrow path at the foot of Thanikunnu. Walking slowly she reached the courtyard of Kanancheri house and removing the old torn cloth covering her from head to foot let out an agonising cry, like the sound of the splitting of tender bamboo shoot:

"Amma, my very own Amma!"

When Atti and her brothers came to the front door, there stood darling Cheriyatti, who had been lost in the forest. Cheriyatti's mother trembling with joy was speechless for a moment. Then she cried out:

"Oh my darling daughter! At last you have come!"

Her four uncles recovering from the shock ran in different directions to inform the *nattukoottam*[2] of their niece's home coming.

Relieved that the *Paradevata*[3] who had abandoned their land had not forgotten them, they all turned to the South and prayed fervently for a moment.

Our people had faced grievous dangers earlier; but compared with the menace that recently rode past our land, with thundering hoof beats raising clouds of dust, our former dangers seemed trivial.

The moment the ruler of the *desam*[4] learned that the Muslim army was coming down the pass from the North, he ordered all his three palanquins to be got ready. With the royal ornaments and the idol of the Goddess Bhagavati, the ruler left in the first one; in the second and third palanquins his consorts and in the front and the rear were his retinue and followers. The palanquin bearers swiftly crossed the territory boundary, climbed the Chammini hills and headed for an alien region.

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Terror-stricken messengers came running from the farthest limits of the land and informed the *nattukoottam* of the demon and the Huna armies in the vanguard of the Muslim forces. They said the marauding invaders mounted on fierce fire spitting beasts were fast approaching with devastation in their wake.

Immediately the worthies of the land sent messengers beating drums to order the people to collect their jewel boxes and the keys of their granaries and if possible with their cattle seek refuge in the Chundolakkala woods which lay beyond the Thanni Hills till they were free from the menace.

As soon as the Muslim army entered the land they dragged out and sent to the gallows the native warriors who had hidden in the banana groves and behind the haystacks. Hence the four fields on the river bank later came to be called the 'gallow fields.'

The warrior who came first, travelling as fast as wind obeying the order to the *nattukoottam* leader and warning the people of the imminent danger, was later awarded the grand title—"Para Kotti ammaman" or "the drum beating uncle." With time the title was shortened to 'Paramman' and the ritual of making offerings to him came into vogue. Soon they started the practice of slaughtering fowls in his name on the night of the new moon in the month of *Medam*.[5]

Seeing the dense clouds auguring the arrival of the heavy monsoons the invading army decided to move southwards before the onrush of any flash floods. On realising that the enemy had departed we started returning to our hearths and homes in little groups.

Our children in later years studying the recorded history of their native land learned from the copper plates that the enemy forces had marched across Thavinjanadu. This was what they were taught: "The ruler of Thavinjanadu deigned to meet the Nawab."

Much later this very statement will be recorded by one of our scholarly researchers who may chance upon the copper plate inscriptions preserved at Orumanassery. But the real fact is in those days our land was bereft of a ruler and we cannot say for certain who the *Tampuran*[6] mentioned in the copper plate was. Neither are we keen to find this out for the simple reason that we ourselves are the historians and the history. But we do know that "Thavinjanadu" incidentally was a corruption of: "the *nadu* (land) deserted by the Goddess Devi." Now enough of this; let us move on to the glories of our temple.

On returning home the people promptly performed the ritual cleansing of their hearths and homes. The *nattukoottam* lost no time to assemble in the shade of the twin banyan trees. They had barely got the palm leaves ready on which to reckon their various losses

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when the young chap Kalia came breathless and broke the shocking news that young Cheriyatti of the Kanancheri *tarawad*[7] was missing.

"Young Cheriyatti not to be found!"

The *nattukoottam* was shocked, their very universe trembled!

In the entire Kanancheri family, Atti was the one and only direct sister to four brothers. Distressed that she did not have an offspring to carry on the *tarawad* the whole community eager to hear the patter of little feet there, conducted concerted prayers. Invoking the deities load-rests for porters, and shelters providing drinking water to the tired way farers were built along the highways. Atti prayed and fasted for fortyone days and was blessed with a darling daughter.

Though the baby girl was initially named Ittati, she was fondly called Cheriyatti meaning little Atti by her mother and uncles. It was when this little darling of the land had blossomed into a young maiden that the Muslim marauders crossed their domain turning it to rubbly wasteland.

★ ★ ★

There was no doubt that Cheriyatti was among the women and children in hiding. Atti was summoned and so was the eldest woman of the community. An enquiry was conducted. While in hiding the girls remained in groups said Atti. One day Cheriyatti escorted by a young *pinati*[8] had gone for a dip in the forest spring, she said. When her daughter failed to show up no one took her absense seriously as she had companions of her age among the *Ettuveettukar*[9] families with whom she spend long hours.

At that the chief of the *nattukottam* with his hand on his bosom let out an anguished cry:

"O my land! Devi had abandoned you!"

★ ★ ★

The monsoons came. Messengers brought news of our *Tampuran* who had fled from his *desam* being given land by the Perumbadappu Raja. Also we heard that he was going to build a temple and install a deity there.

Even after the monsoons ended there was no let up in the tears coursing down Atti's cheeks. It was when we were despairing of the fact that both the Kunnath astrologer and the *panan*[10] soothsayer had not succeeded in their divination to get any clue about Cheriyatti's whereabouts that she suddenly appeared crying out :

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"Amma, my very own Amma!"

★ ★ ★

The worthies of the place assembled in the courtyard. Atti cried out to her young daughter hiding behind the sculpted pillar gazing at her toe nails as if absorbed in a beautiful dream :

"Speak my daughter, speak. What ever happened to you, my darling daughter? Let the menfolk hear."

After her plunge in the mountain spring when she came out and was changing her clothes, the *pinati* whispered that a stranger was standing behind the thickets. No sooner had she said it than he appeared before Cheriyatti—a Muslim soldier! Seeing his lecherous eyes and outstretched arms, Cheriyatti ran for her life to save her honour, crying out: "Oh, Devi, protect me." The soldier inflamed by desire was in hot pursuit of his prey and hunted like a tender hart she ran for all she was worth and fell at the feet of somebody.

"Who was he? Who?" asked the *nattukoottam* in consternation.

"A hunter, a forest hunter."

He hid her in a bower of dense creepers till her besotted pursuer, sorely disappointed went back the way he came. From then on Cheriyatti had lived in the hunter's hut till she was free from danger.

A *vanian*[11] who had come and stood behind the *nattukoottam* agitatedly asked :

"*Tampuratti*,[12] where's the *pinati*? Oh, my respected masters, where's my young Paru?"

Atti's fourth brother fumed. How dare this *vanian* forget his station and speak before the local worthies? Enraged, he drew out his sword.

If the chief of the *nattukoottam* had not pardoned the *vanian* for his thoughtless misdemeanour he might have been killed! Glad at having escaped with life he promply withdrew from there and standing at a distance listened to the interrogations.

The hunter, Cheriyatti said, had fed her on honey and wild fruit; had given her a mat to sleep on. He had stood at the entrance of the hut with his bow, arrows and spear guarding her from wild animals and Muslim soldiers likely to prowl around hunting maidens.

She said the news of the enemies' withdrawal had reached them late as the hut was far away from the heart of the forest, right at the fringes. And then he brought her back along the shortest and least tortuous of routes, she walking in front and he following her. Finally on reaching the outskirts of the land, he went back the way he came.

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Having said all this Cheriyatti covering her lotus-like face with tender hands sobbed and sobbed till she flopped at the foot of the sculpted pillar exhausted. The *nattukootam* dispersed after deciding to reassemble at dusk.

That night a grand feast was prepared at the Kanancheri *tarawad* to which male and female members of the other seven illustrious families came.

The leaves were laid for the first batch of guests—the women and children. When food was about to be served, a venerable old grand mother asked: "Tell me, Oh, you my esteemed wise brothers, is it proper to allow this girl who has come after eating the food of the hunter and sharing his mat to enter the *nalakaya*?[13]"

Not one of us had thought of this in the hurry-scurry of preparations for the feast.

Our ruler who was to advise us on such matters was elsewhere.

The alternative was Cheramballi Cherunni Ejaman, the *karanavar*[14] of the most prominent of the eight *tarawads*, the oldest member of the community. He would be able to solve the problem. Promply the four uncles and a member of the *nattukoottam* ran to the Cheramballi *tarawad*.

Cheramballi Ejaman after long and deep deliberation over the pros and cons of the issue, said :

"No, my nephews, it's not proper, it's not proper."

The guests who had come to the feast left without even a sip of water. Overnight the news spread all over the place and the scandalized women said :

"Just imagine, the virgin of Kanancheri in the bed of a hunter! O, our household deities, let not evil befall our children!"

We had always conducted ourselves honourably, living in awe and fear of our virtuous, illustrious ancestors so that our land was protected. This was a fact that the *karanavar* of the Kanancheri *tarawad* very well knew. Restlessly pacing up and down the courtyard he summoned his sister, and ordered :

"Light the lamp upstairs."

Standing before the lamp the grand old uncle still in his wet clothes after his ablutions prayed fervently invoking all his valourous uncles dead and gone such as Thasammaman, Kandamman, Koppamman Senior, Koppamman Junior and their ilk. His entire body trembled as he swore, touching the lighted lamp. Then he came out and asked his sister and the younger generation of the *tarawad* as if in a state of trance :

"Do you want the *tarawad* disgraced?

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Do you want the land ruined?"

His voice had assumed a different tone; it was as if the older generations were speaking through him. Cheriyatti, half asleep leaning against the wall in front of the *vadakkini*[15] woke up with a start. Standing before her at the doorway were her mother and uncles. To her mother who had started weeping bitterly as if her heart would break, she said :

"Amma, the family shouldn't be disgraced; the land should not be reduced to rack and ruin."

The Kanancheri *karanavar's* anger subsiding, he looked at the younger members and heaved a sigh of relief.

The *nattukoottam* assembled under the twin banyan trees the next day. The Kanancheri members didn't go to the meeting. However one of the four brothers spurred by curiousity went and stood a little away from the assembly pretending to look at the bamboos in the paddy field. However much he strained his ears he could hear nothing for they spoke very softly.

"Why not make a little hut for her some where behind the house quite away from the *tarawad* precincts?" suggested one of the younger men of the family. The *karanavar* gave no response. When Atti was consulted by a cousin of hers, in the midst of her whimpering she muttered :

"But my sister, that doesn't cleanse the stigma either."

The *karanavar* cried out in lamentation :

"Oh my dead *karanavars,* don't subject me to this trial."

Then in a painfully wailing tone he narrated the entire history of Cheriyatti right from the days of Atti's fasting and praying. At the end of it all he plaintively asked his ancestors :

"O, why should this have happened to my darling child, who not long ago romped about in this very courtyard wearing her gold chain and consecrated thread round her tender waist!"

Cheriyatti's voice was then heard :

"Oh my respected elders, those who have reared me, please deign to come to the door of the *vadakkini.*"

When they came, she said to them :

"I will shift to the *uralppura.*"[16]

But her mother reminded her :

"My darling child, the disgrace won't end with that either."

Just then Cheriyatti's eyes dazzled like lightning in the darkness of the *vadakkini.* Her entire body glowed as she felt a strange sensation. Emphatically she said :

"Kanancheri Cheriyatti doesn't need anybody's advice as to how

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to safeguard the honour of her family."

"O Mother, Maha Maya! Protectress of the destitutes ..."

As a gesture of worship every one bowed down and touched the lintel of the *vadakkini*.

As soon as the *nattukoottam* heard about this the whole community buzzed with excitement. People thronged to see Cheriyatti seated cross legged on a rough blanket in the *uralppura*. Absorbed in the memory of some beautiful dream the maiden was oblivious of the crowd before her. Seeing the radiance on her face the people folded their hands in prayer.

Aromanejman who had trudged with great difficulty to see Cheriyatti in this pose declared :

"The spot where this Devi is now seated before her great *sukritam* will henceforth be known as the *Uralppura* temple. It's only after paying their obeisance here that the worshippers will go to the temple down the slope."

As the crowd dispersed in batches and started for their destinations spreading the news of Cheriyatti's divinity, folks from the neighbouring *desams* were seen hurrying towards the Kanancheri *uralppura*.

The night of the fourth day would be auspicious for the event, said Aromanejaman after protracted calculations. The time after *Moolam* when *Avittam* starts. It was her own mother who conveyed this decision to Cheriyatti. As she turned to go, the daughter called her back and said :

"Amma, please tell Valiyammaman not to have it done in the temple pond. For three or four days after that the people bathing there will have problems."

The *nattukoottam* deliberated over this matter and decided on Kummanikkulam, the pond used only by the untouchables and the cattle.

The leader of the *nattukoottam* enquired of a nephew of Cherunniejaman :

"Will Kothan deliver the things on time?"

And then with a sense of pride and self esteem he said indignantly :

"The neighbouring *desams* may have forgotten the age old observances and traditions. Although our ruler is not with us we haven't given up our old customs. What people now do is, resort to subterfuges. They remain outside of the *tarawad* for a certain length of time and then enter the house at an auspicious moment. What new fangled practices! I wonder what will happen to us at this rate? Certainly it was not without reason that our old *karanavars* laid down

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these rules and restrictions. Now look folks, as long as I'm alive things will be done as they should be; but after that I can't imagine the state of affairs."

He heaved a deep sigh of regret.

"But what about the weeds at the bottom of Kummanikkulam? Suppose the legs get entangled in them and the head surfaces?

"You must realise it is after many years that such an occasion has arrived, an occasion to perform such an auspicious deed. And that too the flower of Kanancheri *tarawad*! Weren't you there when Aromanejaman said that nothing untoward should mar the event?"

Down came some able bodied men and promptly leapt into the pond. They took out all the tangles of moss lying at the bottom.

Aromanejaman was at that moment getting a blow by blow account of what was happening. His niece standing behind half concealed by the door said very humbly :

"Had it not been so late at night we could have watched it too."

"No, that is not done — imagine the womenfolk going to see it! After all there are certain rules and restrictions."

So saying the old man reprimanded her. She passed on whatever she had heard to the woman in the neighbouring *tarawads*.

All the people of the *desam* had to observe fast that night. After the midday meal the women were to engage themselves in prayer. These were the rules from time immemorial.

The stone cutter and his wife had in the early hours of the morning delivered two granite blocks with holes cut in the centre. As remuneration for this service he was entitled to a measure of rice and a pair of woven towels from the Kanancheri *tarawad* every year for the rest of his life and to boot the *nattukoottam* gave him a word of praise for the neat way in which the holes were cut.

As the time for the auspicious moment drew near Cheriyatti was decked up by two maids—retainers, whose food and clothes were at the *tarawad's* expense. Except for Cheriyatti's ear rings and drops they moved all her other ornaments that they handed over to her mother. A Nair whose privilege it was to carry the lamp walked in front. As Cheriyatti stepped down to the courtyard in the light of the lamp Atti stood gazing at her daughter; her eyes bore an expression of pride and dignity. The menfolk started following Cheriyatti who walked behind the lamp bearer.

Around the Kummani pond had gathered men of all ages barring the very young—any one who could walk or limp. Many of them carried lamps and torches.

"Where's the rope? Who had undertaken to bring it?"

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asked a voice.

"It's got lost in the crowd," shouted back the leader of the *nattukoottam.*

Cheriyatti stood on the bank at a clearing of wild Pandanus plants.

"Where's Aromettan?"

"But on a similar occasion in the past, I wasn't there. According to the *sastras* who is to tie the rope round the ankles?"

Some said it was to be the chief of the *nattukoottam*; or was it to be the *karanavar* of Kanancheri *tarawad*?

One of them with a sense of humour said:

"Let it be the *karanavar* himself, for isn't he a member of the *nattukoottam* as well? In that case no one can say later that rules were violated."

Slip knots were made at the end of the two ropes tied to the two pieces of rocks. The *karanavar* said to Cheriyatti:

"Child, stand with your feet inside the loops." She did as she was bidden. While the slip knots were being tightened the *karanavar* said :

"Don't you get panicky; there's nothing to fear. It's not the old Kummanikkulam. All the muck has been removed."

Some of the youngsters were getting impatient.

"Why this delay on the *karanavar's* part in tightening the knots?"

"If this dotard can't do it, one of you do it; he need only touch it."

However such an exigency did not arise. The *karanavar* stood aside after carrying out his task. Cheriyatti who was standing alone looked around at all the spectators.

The Nair in charge of the lamp brightened its wick and as the light fell upon her face, the people observed a smile of supreme satisfaction.

"The timid ones sometimes have to be prompted.

Would there by need for that?" asked a person.

No, there was no need for that at all. Cheriyatti gazing at the crowd with her shining eyes as if anointing and blessing them leapt into the pond.

For a brief moment there was utter silence. After that the people dispersed, thankful that no inauspicious happening had marred the sacred act.

The *nattukoottam* also dispersed deciding to return in the early hours of next morning by which time the water would have settled, to perform the rest of the rites.

That night not only the Kanancheri *karanavar* but also all the other worthies of the place had the same strange dream: a fierce looking hunter clad in elephant skin wearing a chain of bones round

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his neck and carrying a shining axe and a rope suddenly descending from the skies and plunging into the Kummani waters and then rising and leaping back to the skies he came from.

The *nattukoottam* on reaching the banks of the Kummani pond early next morning did not utter a word about their dream to one another. The untouchables who were assigned the task of taking out the dead body found to their surprise that it was not there.

The Kanancheri *karanavar* realising it to be a futile exercise said:

"Now that's enough; it won't be found."

The head of the *nattukoottam* turning to the pond and praying muttered:

"Sukritam, Mahasukritam"

and then said impatiently:

"Now, come on. We have to discuss matters pertaining to the building of the temple. Hurry up."

As if renewing the memory of their dream, in one voice they exclaimed:

"Amme, Bhagawati!"

The *nattukoottam* following their leader hastened to the shade of the twin banyan trees in high spirits. □

Translated from Malayalam by V. Ravindran

Glossary

SUKRITAM	A Virtuous deed
1 Karkitakam	The last month of the year in the Malayalam Calendar, the season of heavy monsoons
2 Nattukoottam	Literally the citizenry; but in the social context of the Kerala of the 18th—19th centuries the representatives of all important families or *tarawads* who virtually ruled the *desam*.
3 Paradevata	A household deity
4 Desam	A unit consisting of a cluster of villages
5 Medam	A name of a month
6 Tampuran	A ruler, master
7 Tarawad	The matrilineal Nair joint family
8 Pinati	A woman who waited upon the ladies of illustrious *tarawads*
9 Ettuveettukar	Members belonging to the eight (*ettu*) illustrious *tarawads*.
10 Panan	A singing sooth-sayer
11 Vanian	One belonging to the caste whose traditional profession was extracting oil from the seeds.
12 Tampuratti	The respectful way in which the woman of a Nair

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house hold was addressed by the inferiors. The men would be addressed as either Tamparan or Ejamanan

13 Nalakaya — A four sided structure with a paven court yard in the centre inside a traditional Nair house; also known as Nalukettu.

14 Karanavar — The head of a *tatawad*—he senior most uncle (ammaman)

15 Vadakkini — The room to the north side of the kitchen

16 Uralppura — A room away from the main house for pounding grain in an *ural* or wooden mortar

17 Moolam — The nineteenth constellation

18 Avittam — a northern constellation between Pegasus and Aquila

ANNOUNCEMENT

Indian Literature is planning to bring out three special issues in 1996 focussing on the following literary genres :

1. Autobiography
2. Travel
3. Humour

Authors/translators are invited to send their contributions for consideration. The emphasis will be on specimens and excerpts: however critical articles on the genre with reference to specific languages and texts also will be considered. All submissions must be neatly typed and accompanied by the biodata and addresses of authors/translators and permissions from the authors in the case of translations.

Last date of submission : 30 December, 1995

EDITOR

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JUNK

Anand

NOOR MOHAMMED, passing out of his disturbed sleep into the filth of wakefulness as he opened his eyes, did not hear the loaded truck arriving and taking a reverse turn. For the *kabadiwalas* who lived in the outskirts of Nizamuddin, this was the most painful time of the day—when the army of mosquitoes retreated and the army of flies took over with all its might. The unfinished sleep, the problem of answering the call of nature before the arrival of daylight, the change of guard of mosquitoes and flies, another day of filth knocking at the door—all these send *kabadiwalas* scurrying in all directions. It was not surprising, therefore, that Noor Mohammed, though he had heard the truck arriving, did not pay any attention to it.

More trucks arrived. Men got down from them. At sunrise they numbered a thousand. Their number swelled into several thousands as the sun rose up into the sky. They encircled the slums of the *kabadiwalas,* the small hills of junk they had collected and all the filth and dirt the *kabadis* themselves had excreted. Then picking up the shovels and pick-axes they had brought with them, they set to work. The *kabadiwalas* saw they were extending the boundary of the crematorium of Hindus which lay adjacent, into the wasteland where their slums stood, by demolishing the old wall and setting up a new one. Noor Mohammed and his people watched uneasily as the crematorium opened its mouth to swallow their huts.

Their uneasiness turned to alarm as another horde, representing the *kabristan* on the other side, rushed to the scene. The *kabadis* knew better than to consider them their friends, for they too had a claim to the wasteland. In fact the *kabristan* had already started eating into the slums. Recently a couple of bodies had been buried right in front of the make-shift huts.

Everything happened quickly after that. Hindus and Muslims fought each other with stones and bricks for some time. Then torches were lit and thrown at each other. Some of them fell on the piles of junk—paper and plastic—the *kabadiwalas* had gathered in front of their huts.

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It was the sight of the burning piles of junk which made Noor Mohammed throw all his self-restraint to the winds. He did not know who exactly had set fire to them or whom to take on in the crowd. What enraged him was the destruction of the wealth of junk—waste which others had used and thrown away—he had accumulated, bit by bit, by his combing operations in the city. He saw it as a simple equation: Noor Mohammed on one side and the whole mob on the other. He rushed at the mob with all the stones and sticks he could hold in his lone hand. Some say his clothes caught fire in the commotion. Others deny it. There is an eyewitness account of a flaming torch being thrown at him. But before the torch reached him, a swifter missile, a bullet fired from a police rifle, pierced him. The flaming torch struck him immediately after and among the burning piles of junk, his body, with the bullet inside, burned out into a charred, amorphous mass. He did not get time to reflect on the moral justification of the situation into which he was thrown or the meaning or outcome of his action—not even to utter a cry of desperation at the tragic end he met. We can perhaps take some consolation from the fact that the indignant rage that flared up in him in the last moments of his life gave him a momentary exultation, which contrasted sharply with his rotten, monotonous existence.

The curfew sent back the crematorium and the *kabristan* into their shells for the time being. Noor Mohammed's burrow in the earth was already sealed. The fire-engines brought the burning outskirts of Nizamuddin back to the atmosphere of March, when winter lingered and summer hesitated to enter.

Beyond Nizamuddin, in the bushes near the golf-course, there is an uninscribed tomb. It is six feet long and is whitewashed. Someday, somebody started lighting incense-sticks on it. Saplings planted around it soon grew up into shady trees and in the evenings it served as a haunt of rest and recreation for the marginal men of the city: street circus players, men with performing monkeys, snake-charmers, *kabadis*, *telmalishwalas*. They cooked and ate their food and fed their animals in the shade of the trees. They sang and danced and exchanged stories. They had gathered there on the evening of that fateful day as usual. Perhaps they had not heard about the tragic death of Noor Mohammed, who was a regular visitor there. Even if they had, they did not seem to be affected by it. That was typical of these marginal men, they never reckoned their losses and gains. 'It seems that the snake-charmer has left the town', or 'what happened to the fellow with the monkey, I wonder', they would remark casually. But that was all. They ate and drank and talked and sang as usual.

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Noor Mohammed, smoked out of his hut at Nizamuddin, thus gently slipped out of their conversations, songs and dances. But more about Noor Mohammed later. Let us look at the crematorium and the *kabristan* first.

The trustees of the *kabristan* at Nizamuddin say that it is six hundred years old. Nizamuddin too lay beside Lodhi Road, built by the British, connecting the tombs of Humayun, Safdar Jung and the Lodhis. But gardens and orchards now cover the tombs of Humayun, Safdar Jung and the Lodhis, which were two to four centuries old. Under the vast lawns, trees and flowering plants, the tombs were as dead as the illustrious men whose mortal remains they enclosed. But not so the tombs of Nizamuddin. They are as alive today as they were in the fourteenth century. Hazrat Nizamuddin's was the first, followed by those of Amir Khusru, Jahanara and Mirza Ghalib. All of them were covered with green cloth. Incense-sticks were lighted, flowers were offered and *qawwali* recitals were held regularly. The shouts of flower-sellers, the aroma of *parantha* and *kabab*, the rush of devotees and beggars, large chunks of meat hung up in butchers' shops, the narrow lanes in which business was always brisk—Nizamuddin thronged with life.

For the last six centuries, these tombs of Nizamuddin have been managed by Sufi Pirzadas, who as the Sunnis said contemptuously, made a living of dead men. But the Sufis who swam in the gulf separating Hinduism and Islam—the former with its Supreme Soul fading away into mysticism and the latter with its omnipotent God who determined the fortunes of each individual—and surfaced in Persia and India had nothing to do with death or tombs. They conceived God as the lover and men as his many loves. In their frenzy of love for God, they sang and danced gaily, went without food or clothes and forfeited their mundane bonds. They yearned for the divine union of the lover and the loved. Nothing should come between the lover and the loved—except love. And there was no love apart from the lover and the loved. To the question, 'who smote you', their answer was, 'none other than he who cared for me.' They visualized *tauhid* or the final union as fire. To burn like a candle, to burn through its flame, to weep through its melting wax. Finally when everything is burned and melted down, nothing remains. For them, life was a continuous process of burning and suffering. Drink your own blood when you are thirsty, for no wine is more intoxicating. Eat your heart when you are hungry, for there is no flesh that is more tasty. How can a worm like me pray to you, the greatest? How can I even pay respects to you? They were wary of prayers. Could they take such a

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liberty? As they sang and danced, the Sufis shed not only their clothes and their worldly relations; they cast away customs and moralities, religions and philosophies. As they traversed the path to the union with the Supreme Soul, neither life nor death held any attractions to them.

But this state of affairs did not last. Age and decay eventually caught up with Sufism, a philosophy which had rejected body and mind—even the soul. Diverging from the path of Omar Khayyam—Oh, Lord, open the door for me, Khayyam sang, for you alone can open them, show me the way, for only you can do it—Sufis posited holy men and gurus, and the rituals which went with them, between God and men. Sufism, which had led men away from the *shariyat* which was bound by laws and priests, to *tariquat*, the experience and the joy of the self, now revelled in borrowed experiences. How shall I traverse this path, without a *murshid* to guide me, Rumi lamented. The *murshids*, the *gurus*, who were waiting for this opportunity, promptly presented themselves. The song and dance, born out of the love for God, gave way to the worship of godmen. Miracles took over the realm of personal experience. For the devotees who cried for miracles, they performed trifles of magic and rituals and set themselves up as little gods. In the *dargahs* of godmen, in the cubicles where their relics—teeth, hair and clothes—were kept, men sought divine solutions for their earthly woes.

All around the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin, who, falling out with Giazuddin Tughlak, turned the waters of a *baoli* into oil and lighted lamps with it, were buried the more notable among the devotees, who had come to see his miracles: Amir Khusru, Jahanara, Mirza Jehangir, Mirza Ghalib. In course of time, their tombs too acquired divinity. Each tomb sprang to life and grew in stature. Each demanded its *chadar* and its share of flowers and incense. They got them all. *Qawwalis*, *parantha* and *kabab*, meat stores, trades and crafts—as the locality grew in leaps and bounds, the Pirzadas, whom their detractors condemned for making a living out of the dead, flourished.

Today, tombs are an integral part of Nizamuddin's identity. Not satisfied with making demi-gods out of saints and shrines out of tombs, not content with seeking prosperity in life from the spirits of the dead, death marched on in its conquering stride. Adjacent to the *dargahs* of the saints and the tombs of the lesser among the holy men, were buried the bodies of men and women who could acquire no divinity. Dying of dysentry, run over by buses, blasted by bombs, burned alive in riots, the bodies of the common people of Delhi

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reached the *kabristan*. The Pirzadas claim that these *dargahs* of Sufis endow men with a perpetually renewing bond, cemented by the *barkat* and the spiritual presence of the dead saints. As the dead could claim more divinity than the living, the graves of the common people, as they swelled the ranks of the dead, became yet another bridge between the dead saints and the living men who sought their blessing.

On that evening in March, the Pirzadas of Nizamuddin fought a pitched battle for the tribe of the dead. The divinity invested on the dead for more than six centuries and the expansion of the *kabristan*, keeping pace with the increase in the number of deaths, gave a legitimacy to their war-cries. If burying a body in the same spot where another was buried earlier amounted to desecrating the memory of the first deceased, the growing tribe of the dead certainly needed a growing *kabristan*. To give a man a niche of his own after his death—which was denied to him in a life of miseries and wants—who shall dare deny this call of the *kabristan*? What shall we do with the bodies of the dead? How long shall we bear their coffins on our shoulders?

In fact, neither the Hindus nor the Sikhs who maintained the crematorium had an answer to this call of the *kabristan*. For one thing, the crematorium had come up only recently, a tract of land with no divinity attached to it, catering to the new areas attached to the city, as it expanded southwards. For another, though the Vaishnavas, taking a leaf out of the Sufi's book started *anugata upasana*, though a stray saint like Ramakrishna declared himself to be God, and though the Sikhs with their cries of *Wahe Guru*, elevated Nanak, a philosopher saint, to the level of the Creator, worship of saints never became popular among them. Even when it did, there was no attempt to tie them down to where they were cremated. Being idol-worshippers, they had no lack of places to light incense-sticks and make offerings. They communicated with the dead, not from the crematorium, but from Kasi and Rameswaram, where they went to feed the departed souls on their *shradha*. They never prayed to their departed souls for *barkat* or blessings. On the contrary, they gave the dead souls all they could. The place of cremation had no individual significance. They could cremate any number of dead bodies on the same spot. Why did the Hindus try to occupy the *kabadi's* basti when they knew that a crematorium had no divinity attached to it and there was really no need to extend its boundaries?

There is no direct explanation for it. If one insists on one, it has to be sought in the war-cries for the *kabristan*. The Hindus argued that each Muslim, when he died, became the owner of six feet of

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land, and consequently, this land was lost for the Hindus forever. Thus the Muslims, not content with attacking the Hindus when alive, posed a threat to them even after their death. Violence had to be met with violence, reproduction with reproduction, death with death, the *kabristan* with the crematorium. That was the final solution. And thus, on that cool morning of March, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety, Hindus entered the basti of *kabadis* with pickaxes and shovels. If the boundaries of the crematorium could not be extended, at least the encroachment of the *kabristan* was to be stopped.

Was all that happened on that cool morning in March a prelude to a catastrophic war? Only history can tell us. Anyway, from what we saw of the two groups, each trying to steal a march over the other in ferocity, throwing all their might into the pitched battle to extend the boundaries of the *kabristan* and the crematorium, to accomodate more numbers of their dead, it appeared that they certainly anticipated such a war. We also saw Noor Mohammed, the *kabadiwala* caught between the warring groups, fall dead with a bullet in his chest. In this battle between life and death, materialism and spiritualism, gods and saints, philosophy and pragmatism, or just for possession of a piece of land, who shall claim Noor Mohammed as their martyr? Can marginal men ever become martyrs? Living outside the limits of society, they can only be victims. The horses which died in the American Civil War were nobody's martyrs. There have never been any war or revolution for the interests of the marginal men. But marginal men do get killed in wars and revolutions. Killed for nothing. The *kabadiwalas* who bought and sold old newspapers in which events lay petrified, and empty liquor bottles drained of the last drop of intoxication, have never felt that surge of hot blood in their veins which prompts men to leap into battle.

But was Noor Mohammed a mere victim, a worm rotting outside the death-trap of Nizamuddin, slipping through the dragnets of the songs and dances of the marginal men who gathered under the trees of the golf course?

Noor Mohammed was a week-end caller to me. He materialised in our colony each Sunday, going his round of the colony with his cries of '*kabadiwala, kabadiwala*'—a reticent, but pleasant young man. Buying old newspapers, bottles and tins from us, handing over the price of the lot, hauling his huge sack on his back, he would leave quietly.

When my wife haggled with him over the price of the junk, I would remind her: consider yourself blessed that he bundles away all these from this hole which we call our home. At least, he makes

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it possible for us to walk without bumping into things. Noor Mohammed, though he knew not a word of our language, would grin at us getting the drift of what we were talking about. Often he would give us a bit more than the normal price. Seeing his difficulty in raising his balance and putting the weights and junk in the pans, all with his lone hand, I would try to help him. But he did not really need any help. Watching him taking his round of the colony, glancing at each balcony and window, calling out in his sing-song voice to the residents to persuade them to sell him what they no longer needed, I used to wonder at the waste we created for him to take away. For all his earnestness and diligence in collecting them, how reluctant we were to part with the things we no longer needed! In our tiny apartments, we went on piling up junk: old magazines, children's school books, clothes which no longer fitted us, furniture, house-hold implements and toys fallen into disuse. Though old and useless, we accumulated them for some fancy of ours in the shelves, in cupboards, under bedsteads, even in a raw pile on the floor in the open. The magnitude of the junk takes us by surprise only when we shift houses. Where did all this rotten, dusty, rusted junk come from? The last time I had a transfer, I sold about a quintal of paper cuttings to the *kabadiwala*. All of them were my reference material. But for want of space, they became mere junk to be discarded. Did I really grieve over the loss of the black letters which had started fading from the paper on which they were printed as well as from my mind? Cleaning up is a depressing job. But sometimes it becomes philosophical, taking you to the heights reached by dispassionate hermits. Over four decades of wanderings, travels and change of dwellings, I had developed a strange relationship with junk. It had become a pattern: Reluctant to part with it, I accumulated it; for want of space, I discarded it. Then I accumulated it again. Stones, pieces of wood, dried leaves preserved between pages of books, printed pages, scenes imprisoned in photo-frames, taped voices ... How many of the articles I treasure now were with me in my childhood? How many of them did I inherit from my ancestors? Not many. Age makes things unimportant and insignificant. On the other hand, age sometimes makes them priceless too. There is no fixed life-cycle for a thing, to determine how long it will be around before the *kabadiwala* takes it away. When does one forget the portraits of one's ancestors and start gazing at the photographs of our children? When do children cease to look at their parents? What makes an article a piece of stinking junk or a priceless curio? Each Sunday, when I watched Noor Mohmmed walking away from my door with his heavy sack slung over his shoulder, and his

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shrill cries of *kabadiwala* getting lost among the yellow-coloured apartments looking brighter in the sun, my thoughts would wander and get lost in the labyrinths of evolution, history, extinction of races, wars, revolutions and migrations—processes which made new things look old, and created junk.

Noor Mohammed, who was normally a lonely introvert, who seemed to be lost in himself, became my acquaintance, or even my friend when we met unexpectedly in the haunt near the tomb on the golf course. I was on my evening walk, and seeing a narrow track going into the woods, taking it for a shortcut for somewhere, I decided to follow it. Instead of to any thoroughfare, it took me to that strange haunt. It was bustling with men and animals of all kinds: monkeys, bears, snakes. Some of the men cooked, while others sang and danced. I was watching a snake-charmer opening the mouth of his snake and pushing pieces of food into it, when Noor Mohammed appeared with his Sunday smile. That a man like me would visit their haunt was beyond his wildest imagination. Overwhelmed he introduced me to the monkey-performer, the *telmalishwala,* the snake-charmer and the beggar.

The fact is that I returned that evening more bewildered than those men and women who had gathered at the haunt were on seeing me among them. The track which I had expected to lead me to the familiar world I knew, led me, instead, to a blind alley. The people I saw there did not belong to the society in which I lived. They did not care for—or rather, were unaware of—such things as homes, jobs, families; nations, languages and religions, over which we fretted, quarelled or shed blood. Existing beyond the limits of our social order, they were a discovery to me. But they were the same people I met everyday on the road; only that I never paid any attention to them even while I watched their performance or requisitioned their services. I just accepted them as they were. I fancied myself as a discoverer in that I found out that I could speak to them as I spoke to the men and women I met in queues, in the lobby or a train compartment. I asked the monkey-performer about his children and discussed the price of articles in the market with the snake-charmer.

Once as my wife tried to calculate the difference in the prices per kilogram of Times of India and India Today, Noor Mohammed and I became engaged in a long dialogue. Noor Mohammed was a Bangladeshi refugee—a refugee twice over. One could not call him a Bihari—he was not born at the time of the Partition. But his parents were Biharis. Dreading communal riots, they ran away to what was then East Pakistan. Two decades later, when the Bengalis brandished

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their swords against him for being a Bihari, Noor Mohammed took refuge in Hindustan. "Babu, you sell the papers because they are old, these bottles because you have used up all the oil in them. But when does a man become unwanted in a territory?" Noor Mohammed asked me. Noor Mohammed was continuously expelled from one place to another. Uprooted two decades ago from the delta of the confluence of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra, he has now reached the western chunk of the sub-continent where the greenery recedes and the deserts begin. As he waded through blood and tears, insults and jails, he lost an arm, his home, his family, relatives, village, language, religion ... They fell off from him one after the other. Flung into one dustbin after the other by civilization, he moved to the margin of the society and then to the barren no-man's land beyond it. The candle of his life too burned and wept. But unlike the Sufis, he never reached God. He became a mere *kabadiwala*. Stuck to the slums of Nizamuddin, without taking roots, without branching off, without bearing fruit. Noor Mohammed bore the marks of age, though he was not old yet.

One day, I accompanied Noor Mohammed to the slums in which he lived. It was a triangle created by two flyovers which connected several busy thoroughfares of the city. On the third side lay one of the most ancient—and one of the dirtiest—slums in the city, Nizamuddin. The *kabadis* used the same tins, sacks and plastic items they collected to build their huts. The women sorted the junk the men and children brought and prepared seperate piles of them. They wore no clothes worth the name. It seemed a long time since any one of them had taken a bath. Even the white of the eyes of the children had turned a muddy pale yellow. The stench of urine excreta and countless other rotten wastes pervaded the whole slum. Flies and rats infested it in their thousands.

Noor Mohammed revealed to me the trade secrets of the *kabadi* business. Early in the morning the men and children set out with their sacks. The men gave the junk they bought from houses to the women, and the children handed over to them what they collected from roads, markets and garbage cans. Sorting them patiently, the women prepared the huge piles of junk which lay in the yards in front of the houses of the junk merchants. Each junk merchant had his territory clearly demarcated. They were in fact little magnates who had their own comfortable houses in the slum. At the end of every week, the trucks of recycling companies arrived to collect the junk from the junk merchants.

"Things are not what you make them out to be, *saheb*," Noor

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Mohammed said, "everybody here is well off. Everybody gets two square meals a day."

I could not help reflecting on his idea of prosperity. He was happy, living in the midst of all the filth and squalor, if he could get two square meals a day.

"But Noor Mohammed, all this filth, all this ..."

"All this piss and shit," Noor Mohammed suddenly turned a philosopher. "What are we really made of, *saab*? We certainly make all these piss and shit, though we may or may not make better things. As long as we live, we go on producing piss, shit, sweat, spittle. And we become rotting corpses when we die."

I gazed at him amazed. He moved over smoothly to other topics, as if there was nothing unusual in what he had just remarked: that, it being winter, I could not see the hardships of the slums at their worst, that the men and women who now slept under big quilts would sleep on the road and under the flyover in summer. That the maidan would be bathed in the fiery sun during day and a kind of dust at night. Noor Mohammed talked about the flaming meteors he saw in the sky as he lay on his back in the open, about the vehicles that passed by, making the flyover shake, about the alluring notes of the *qawwalis* which floated from the *dargah* as the roar of the vehicles died down.

"Do you know what the greatest burden of civilization is," I asked my wife that evening. "The materials which we excrete each day, the waste that is left over from what we eat. How ever hard we try to carry it away through underground pipes and in trucks and waggons, it goes on accumulating around us. To deal with it, an entire branch of science called wastology has been founded. Do you know what Noor Mohammed said today? We are all corpses set to become a nuisance to our children."

My wife was amused. "It seems that you have been taken in by that *kabadiwala*."

"Not by a *kabadiwala*, by *kabada*—waste, decay. It takes more time to extricate ourselves from waste and decay than what we spent to make a living. Look: the junk that piles up in our homes, the garbage that litters the city roads, the piles of cement and concrete left behind by construction workers, the effluents discharged by factories, the bodies of the dead, the paper we write on, the words we throw out in speeches, old topics, rotten theories, ideas and ideologies. We are frightened of presenting a new idea or theory—frightened of it turning into a rotting problem tomorrow ..."

What I heard next was the news about the riots and firing at

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Nizamuddin. I did not pay much attention when I heard the news in the evening nor when I read about it in the papers the next morning. Suddenly I caught Noor Mohammed's name.

"This may be some other Noor Mohammed," my wife said. There may be many Noor Mohammeds in Nizamuddin, even among the *kabadiwalas*. Take it from me, he will be here as usual next Sunday."

"Let us put it this way," I said. "If Noor Mohammed is dead, another Noor Mohammed will come next Sunday, to take away the junk, to recycle it, to give it back to us as consumer goods, to give new life to lifelessness, to rotting articles. Though caught in the crossfire over and over again, in the war between two rotting systems of beliefs, Noor Mohammed will rise up again. It is such a relief, isn't it?"

Noor Mohammed had enough opportunities to die—when the Pakistan army butchered people in the streets of Bangladesh, when cholera reigned in the refugee camps, when the naxalites abducted him in Bihar taking him for an informer, when he was arrested and thrown in jail during the Emergency for wandering about in suspicious circumstances, when he was caught in the riots in Delhi which took three thousand lives—there are innumerable opportunities for man to kill man without the constraints and prohibitions of the laws and conventions built up over ten thousand years. But death caught up with him here among the piles of junk, in the tussle between rival burial grounds.

It was two weeks before his death that Noor Mohammed had talked about our dead bodies, describing them as the final wastes we left behind. He did not say anything about the dispute between the *kabristan* and the crematorium. It had already become a problem affecting the lives of the slum dwellers, a menace disturbing their nights and adding to the uncertainties of their days. In spite of this why didn't he say anything about it? Was that what he had in mind when he talked about the waste we expelled and our corpses which he considered the ultimate waste products? The corpses of the two religions which, not being able to bury them, their followers carried eternally on their shoulders? The burial ground which had to be expanded in advance for the catastrophic war that was to rage between them? □

Translated from Malayalam by K.M. Sherrif

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TEXT

Krishna Baldev Vaid

THE bus dropped me there and moved on like a cantankerous old woman. For a while I stood there gazing at her receding back, trying to make out a mysterious message that was not there. Then I shook my head the way some people do in order to drive out a stale idea and make room for a fresh one. I had no idea in my mind at the moment, which does not mean my mind was empty. It never is, which is why, perhaps, I keep shaking my head in the hope that by doing so I'll be able to empty my mind. I never succeed in this effort. So after I had shaken my head, I felt a little heavier, my mind a little more cramped, a lot less empty.

I was carrying no baggage, from which fact I inferred I had not arrived there after a long journey and I would not stay there for very long. These days I can comprehend my situation only through inferences. No I can't comprehend it, I only try to do so. I never succeed but I do not desist from trying. The day I do that, I'll sit down, resignedly, resting my head on my knees. That day is not too far off now. I should feel happy. I don't.

That dim square where the bus had dropped me looked neither familiar nor unfamiliar, just as everything looks to me these days, not just everything but every person also, not just every person but every mental state also, especially at night, when instead of going to bed I set out on my nocturnal stroll in places I never visit during the day because I am scared of them during the day. I am scared of them at night also but at night I find it impossible to fall asleep, so I set out on my nocturnal stroll, clasping my fear to my bosom.

I decided I had come to that dim square in the course of a nocturnal stroll, by mistake or design, and the bus journey too had been part of that stroll, so to speak. I failed to recall any event or incident that might have happened during the bus journey, from which I inferred nothing because I did not feel like doing so. Of course, I could have done that without feeling like doing so, just as I do many other things, but I did not, from which I inferred my bus

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journey must have been absolutely uneventful. This, however, should not be taken to mean I always forget every uneventful experience, for I seldom do that.

After having stood there for some time, I closed my eyes and decided upon the direction I would take and started getting ready to do that. That was a slow and difficult process. Finally just as I was about to cross the road, I saw him standing at a distance. I can make him out no matter how dark it is, for his appearance is similar to mine, so much so that at times I take it to be my own. He wore a long beard. He keeps changing his appearance in order to put me off his track. Sometimes it is a long beard, sometimes a short moustache. He had not seen me. Or perhaps he was pretending he had not. He often does that. I used to mind it but I do so no more. In fact, I have started turning this to my advantage. Since he does not recognize me, or pretends he does not, I feel free to watch him. So even as I crossed that road, I kept my head turned back towards him. I noticed he held a woman firmly by her hand. The woman sat on the pavement. I noticed he was trying to drag her while she entreated him even as she resisted him, her face distorted by her entreaties and resistance. He seemed obviously infuriated by her resistance. Everything seemed to be happening in an eerie silence, in a place far from me or in a dream or a picture or my imagination. I could not make out who the woman was, which irritated me so much so that I felt like going over to her and cursing her. I wanted her to stop whining. I wanted her to stand up to him instead of resisting passively. Perhaps he also wanted her to do the same. He was trying to drag her across the road I was crossing at some distance from where they were. The distance was short but I could hear neither his curses nor her entreaties. It seemed either they were deaf or I dumb. Now she was trying to fold her hands but since one of her hands was in his firm grip, it looked as if she was trying to clap with one hand.

From across the road I saw her stretched out on the pavement in an effort to resist being dragged across the road and I felt sorry for her for the very first time. One of her hands was still in the bearded monster's grip. I had an impulse to hurl a stone or curse at him but I suppressed it, I didn't want to break the spell because of which I was watching the scene and getting some perverse pleasure out of it in spite of my sympathy for the woman and horror at what he was doing to her. I couldn't tell whether the woman had raised her voice or my ears had suddenly opened, but I heard she was begging him to leave her alone, for she could not desert her children for his sake. I looked at her more carefully now and found she was

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rather attractive in spite of her distorted face. I had a desire to rush over and rebuke that bastard: why are you forcing her to desert her children; why don't you leave her alone? I didn't do that because I knew it would have made her situation worse, if anything, for no man tolerates, another man taking her woman's side. Besides, I had a queer feeling I was invisible to them. Of course my prudential cowardice could not have been ruled out as the real reason for my non-interference. Actually, I wanted to walk away from all that, thus putting an end to my nocturnal stroll, for what I had seen was enough and would occupy my thoughts and challenge my comprehension for quite some time. And yet I stood there rooted to the spot.

The woman had straightened herself into a sitting position once again, or, perhaps, that monster had pulled her back into it. She was still entreating him; he was still trying to drag her across the road. His beard now seemed false to me. I had a desire to run back, pull off his beard, throw it in the gutter, and shout: Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Why are you treating her so astrociously, wearing this false beard, forcing her to desert her children? Why don't you leave her alone? My mind often inspires me to do what is either dangerous or absurd, which is why I refuse to be inspired, especially at night. Dangers do not appeal to me the way they used to once upon a time. Especially at night. Absurdity bores me. Especially at night.

Now he was dragging her with all his might. He held her hands in his, and she looked like a sack being dragged. Her entreaties had stopped, so had his curses. I could imagine her skin being bruised and scratched as he pulled her after him. I could imagine her hoping that he would suddenly take pity on her and tell her she could bring her children along. I looked all around in that dim darkness hoping to see her children lurking somewhere but saw nothing except the night and that dim square. When I turned to them, they had vanished. I was not astonished; I never am when I am taking my nocturnal strolls. Several explanations came to my mind and sounded equally plausible. The road must have cracked apart and swallowed them; the darkness may have devoured them; perhaps they had never been there; perhaps I had gone over to some other realm of being or non-being ...

Just as I thought I had resolved the whole enigmatic experience to my satisfaction, I saw a piece of paper fluttering on the road. I was instantaneously convinced it was a message that woman had left for me before disappearing. I swooped upon that paper and picked it up. Swooping is not easy for me any more but I have seen I can always swoop upon pieces of paper, especially at night, for I have

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this conviction, no, I have this superstitious hope that some night I'll receive the message I've been waiting for all my life. I haven't received it so far, it should go without saying. I had this fear that someone or perhaps the same one would be watching me from somewhere. I shoved that paper into my pocket. If someone or the same one appears and demands that paper, I'll deny there is any, or I'll say that paper is mine because I found it. But nobody made any appearance or demand. I took that paper out of my pocket. The paper was so crisp that it could be taken for a parchment. It carried a text that seemed written or inscribed in red ink or perhaps blood.

I started making out that text in the light of the moon. I got so fully absorbed in the task that I lost track of time and myself. When I came to, I found myself sitting on a dais, facing an audience. A person was saying something about me. What he was saying was false but appealing. I held that paper in my hands. It had not lost its crispness. I was getting ready to read it out. I was sweating profusely but I knew the sweat would dry up along with my throat the moment I stood up to read. A moment after I start speaking from a dais, I become senseless and keep muttering something in that state of senselessness, without any eye contact with anybody in the audience, without any kind of gesticulation, and collapse into embarrassed silence before having made any point and before my time is over. I start sweating as soon as I sit down. But all I have to do just now is to read this text out, I told myself. Perhaps some of those sitting over there would like me to make some introductory remarks and refer to the context of this text; I am afraid I won't do that, for I don't know the text fully, much less its context.

So I got up as soon that person sat down after uttering all kinds of falsehoods. That paper was before my eyes, the audience out of my sight. The text became suddenly so dim that I couldn't make it out. When I tried to read it after rubbing my eyes a few times, I found many words interlocked with one another and the rest on top of one another. A few of them were running around also. I tried to rearrange them in some order but in vain. I started hoping that somebody would snatch that paper out of my hands and start reading it fluently but nobody came to my rescue. I could have announced I was unable to read that text but I felt too embarrassed to do that. It struck me that instead of reading that text, I should make up my own and speak it out, something that had exercised me for years, something profound and personal that I had always wanted to share with an audience. It struck me that I would be able to get away with anything, thanks to the ambiance of the occasion. It struck me that

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if I did not open my lips soon, they'd all start cursing me.

The thought of their curses gave me the kind of pleasure that woman might have received from being dragged across that road. This strange analogy gave me a strange kind of mortification. For a while I clung to that mortification. That paper was still before my eyes. It struck me that if I kept standing there like that, the audience might think I was reading the text but they had all gone deaf. This strange idea gave me some comfort. For a while I clung to that comfort. Then I thought I should remove that paper and look at the audience for a second. All I saw was desolate darkness. There was no audience. The dais was actually a heap of dust in which I stood buried up to my knees, trying to read a text. And I wasn't laughing.

□

Translated from Hindi by the Author



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POINT COUNTERPOINT

Shiv K. Kumar

SINCE he'd been bilked twice this month, he wasn't sure it would turn out right even this time. But what can a husband do when he feels aroused—suddenly. He could be turned on by anything—a sudden downpour, wind soughing through the potted crotens on his balcony, a ghazal sung by a husky, sensuous voice over All India Radio, or even a bird's warble. This evening, however, it was the whiff of her eau-de-jasmine that had wafted across the hallway into his studio. Vinod had almost a canine susceptibility to perfumes. Each perfume, he believed, had also its distinct sibilation and rhythm, not just its aroma. And as for eau-de-jasmine, it always vanquished him, utterly. It set his heart a-flutter like a canna's tiara on a windy day.

Since he couldn't now hold his brush steadily, he let it drop on the easel. His temples throbbing, tongue rolling between his famished lips, he paced toward the half-door and flung it open to look down the hallway. And there she was, walking serenely toward her prayer-room, draped in a saffron-tinted sari, its folds flapping against her thighs, like the waves lisping as they break against a beach. He was now all ears to capture the frou-frou of her sari. If only he could grab her just there—this body beautiful, lissome, scented, foam-bathed. Even the *sastras*, he knew, didn't consider it sinful to desire one's own wife—anytime, anywhere. But, perhaps, not in her moment of prayer for that would be challenging the gods themselves.

Since these thoughts kept racing through his mind, he couldn't go back to his painting. Suddenly it began to drizzle, its patter on the tin-roof above his balcony sounding a palpable musical notation—pit-pat-pit, pat-pit-pat.

Like a predatory animal, Vinod now stalked toward the prayer-room, behind the rear verandah. And there stood Rita in front of a large, bronze idol of Lord Krishna, her eyes half-shut in a dreamy, mystic gaze, her long ebony hair cascading down her pigeon shoulders, her palms raised prayerfully to her deity. Then she broke into a bhajan :

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Come, fluting your way, into my heart,
O Lord. I've been waiting for you,
each day and night—
my body aching with desire ...

So had he been waiting for her all these days, he said to himself. Then she knelt before the idol, her face almost touching the bare floor, in precisely the same posture as in one of the sketches in his *Khajuraho Book of Erotic Paintings*. He knew it was a mortal sin to let such lustful thoughts seize him when his wife had gone deep into prayer.

So he'd lost her again!

Crestfallen, he retreated to his studio and stood at the window, looking into the darkness outside. The lamp-posts along the street below glimmered like the eyes of animals in a dark forest. As his gaze rested momentarily on the rain-washed window-pane, he saw his face reflected there, wizened and pallid. Reflexively, his right hand began to press against the hollows of his cheeks to perk them up, as it were. "If you'd massage your cheeks like this twice a day," he recalled his friend, Gulshan, telling him, "you could easily knock off at least ten years— to match your young wife." But, though five years younger than him, Gulshan himself looked much older. "Well, that's my daily scotch," he'd quip in self-defence, "and those other things, you know."

For his gnawing sense of senility, Vinod held Rita responsible, entirely. He felt she hardly offered him any emotional sustenance. Each time he desired her, she slipped through his fingers like an eel. And if he ever got her, she'd make love as though she moved through some sacrificial ritual—her fists clenched, her lips and feet frigid, her eyes blank like a dead bird's.

For all this, he put the blame not only on her Lord, but also on her guru, Swami Sadananda, whose weekly discourses on the *Gita* had drained her of all desire. Even on her dressing-table, lay heaps of pamphlets on such subjects as meditation, self-denial—"the only avenues to happiness." Whose happiness, Vinod would have liked to ask this godman, this home-wrecker.

He must go out somewhere, anywhere—maybe to his own "swami", Gulshan, to cool off. Since his daughter, Kavita, had not yet returned from her Evening Tutorial College (wasn't it rather late, he thought), he decided to leave a cryptic note on his wife's dressing-table:

"Suddenly remembered I'd to meet a visiting artist this evening. May get back quite late. So no supper for me."

He picked up the first taxi on the street and dashed off to Gul-

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shan's.

"That's a nice surprise, Vin," Gulshan greeted him, puffing away at his Havana cigar, poised leisurely in front of his half-empty Johnny Walker.

"Well, I just thought ... "

"How about some nectar?" Gulshan asked, pointing toward his bottle.

"You know I don't drink much, but this evening—sure."

"Eh, you don't sound too good," Gulshan said, pouring him a large scotch. "Anything wrong?"

"Everything."

"Everything is nothing," Gulshan jibed, rolling his cigar between his thumb and index finger.

"It's Rita. She seems to have fallen for the holy stuff. Saffron-tinted saris and singing bhajans all the time."

"So no conjugal bliss, old man?"

"Nothing."

"And no appeal to law either since you're pitched against the gods themselves."

"Stop being frivolous," Vinod almost felt stung.

"On the contrary, I'm being very serious. Why should you throw it all up at forty six? I tell you, you're behaving like a little mouse, timid and undemanding ... You know what our sage Manu has said about women?"

"What?" Vinod knew that Gulshan would now come up with something scintillating. If Vinod was not much of a boozer, nor chased women like his friend, he did value his sagacity, his forthright candour.

"A woman should be trained like a pet animal. Like a cocker, to stand up and beg for little crumbs of love."

"Aren't you improvising, swamiji?" Vinod smiled. "There were no cockers in the Vedic age ..."

"Never mind. I was only trying to render the spirit of one of Manu's injunctions ..." A pause. "Look, I do have something for you. An instant cure. Always works like a miracle ... A call-girl!"

"Aren't you selling me a cliche? Straight out of some soap opera?"

"Not at all," Gulshan replied. "It's a real panacea, even for an elitist like you. Time-tested also. Choose your moment, place and the girl. Any complexion or temperament—as simple as that. A song-girl, an intellectual, a flame in bed. Or all the three in one. Let me do it for you. Dad knows what's good for his child."

"Bravo!" But, although Vinod tried to sound somewhat outraged,

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he'd swallowed the bait already.

"Come on, old boy," Gulshan said, touching his friend's right shoulder. "Wouldn't you like to see them in the nude. As models. And what about an artist's curiosity to savour everything?"

"Okay, I'm game for it. Let's go."

In a few minutes, a taxi brought them to the traffic lights in front of Red Fort, and then it swerved into a bylane behind the Jain Temple that stands at the mouth of Chandni Chowk. At its dead end, they got off. Gulshan now led his friend into an alley, dark and narrow. "Strait is the gate," Vinod said to himself. He'd always thought he knew Delhi like the back of his hand, but now he realized he'd never seen these murky bylanes and alleys. "Come to the Lord, O ye lost one," came a chant floating all the way from the Jain Temple. "That one is for you, Rita," Vinod smiled to himself. "Not for your husband who's now out to explore new territories."

Down the middle of this alley, an old man, his teeth stained with betel-leaf, walked up to them.

"Looking for birds, gentlemen?" he asked, with a twinkle in his eyes. "May I help you? Exciting stuff. Chicks from good families, college girls—anything ... they do it as much for fun as for money."

"Rates?" Gulshan queried.

"Don't worry about these things, sir. Service before self. Let me first give you a memorable evening." He beamed and beckoned them to follow him. He stopped in front of a three-storeyed building. Even in the anaemic street light, further muffled by the ceaseless drizzle, Vinod's eye caught the pattern on the panelled door—a fish peering out of a net. As he turned round, he saw on the door behind him another pattern—a wine-bowl, half-tilted. He must return to this alley, he told himself, if only to sketch these doors in his scrap-book.

"Come on in, gentlemen," the old man's words jerked into Vinod's thoughts. As they were ushered into the house, the pimp whispered: "I have some special college girls for you."

But hardly had they climbed up a few steps when Vinod suddenly felt paralyzed. From the top floor was coming a young, female voice, singing with precisely the same tone, modulation and inflexion as his daughter Kavita's.

And the film-song too was the one she hummed most of the time.

Why should only the moonshine steal
through the window
to caress my milk-white breasts?
Why don't you walk in too
when even the gods are asleep?

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Vinod felt he couldn't hold himself any longer. He called out to Gulshan who'd gone up a few steps ahead of him :

"Gulshan, I want to go back home."

"What's come over you, Vin?"

"Nothing."

"Then get back home quick, child," Gulshan said tartly. "Mom's waiting ... Well, I'm staying on."

Vinod chose not to respond—came down the steps quickly, and was back home in no time.

It was Kavita who answered the door.

"Mom told me you'd be late tonight," she said. "Didn't you have to meet someone?"

"Yes dear, but something went wrong and I decided to come back home early to my daughter."

"Thanks, Dad," she said. "How I wish you'd come with me to college this evening. We had an impromptu music competition and I bagged the first prize."

"Great!" Vinod patted her on the shoulder. "And I know what you sang there ... 'Why should only the moonlight steal ...' "

Kavita blushed to hear the words spoken by her father; they sounded so awful, so embarrassing.

"No, you got it wrong, Dad. It was a bhajan."

"Then I know the bhajan too," Vinod smiled. " 'Come fluting your way into my heart ...' "

Now they both laughed out together.

"Where's she?" Vinod asked.

"In the drawing-room, with her guruji."

"But it's so late," Vinod sounded rattled.

"He'd come to bless some newly-wedded couple in the neighbourhood and he thought ..."

"Of coming here to bless your Mom, his favourite devotee. Then he mumbled to himself. Also to bless a couple or blast another marriage!"

"What did you say, Dad?"

"Nothing."

Vinod now waited for Kavita to go to her room so that he could have a glimpse of the "couple" in his own house—the guru and his disciple. In order to get his daughter out of the way, he paced towards his studio as though he had something to do there. But as soon as he heard Kavita walking away, he came to the hallway whose rear wall had a built-in aquarium through which one could peer into the drawing-room. He settled into a chair beside the aquarium as if he

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was watching the fish frisk about, chasing each other. But through the glass-pane and the limpid water, he now saw the swami seated on the divan while his wife lay prostrate on the floor, kissing his feet. The swami's eyes, however, were focussed on her arched back, his face flushed, his lips ruddy and moist.

"D-n him!" Vinod said to himself. For a moment, he felt like charging into the room to throttle this godman. Instead, he just trudged back to his studio, utterly shattered.

He stood at the window and started looking blankly into space. The drizzle had by now swollen into rain and the darkness outside seemed to have thickened. He put out his hand as though to feel the weight of darkness. If water is a cleanser, he mused, why can't it wash off the darkness, or at least dilute its murkiness. But, surprisingly, it was getting heavier and heavier—it was now seeping into everything, even into the folds of his being. □



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EXCERPT FROM A NOVEL

BOOK ONE

Sharmishtha Mohanty

Flight

INSIDE an airplane, moving straight to another point in this endless world, people fall asleep on other's shoulders and throughout the night dream their astral dreams. They wake confused in the morning, not happy at having rested on unknown flesh and bone. They straighten their sleep creased faces and become distant again.

On earth, the mango tree is going through its eternal changes. The sun is making the tree dark green, hard for the eye to penetrate. When the clouds come they lighten the tree's colour, and the tree turns generous, offering each of its infinite details. Every leaf can be seen clearly under the gentle clouds, with the one broad rib through the middle, the small ribs striking out on either side, and the random curves of the leaf edges. Far inside the branches there are two yellow leaves, close to a fall.

So many miles flown in the quiet air and morning passes, evening comes again, somewhere over fields and cities and rivers. On earth perhaps there is a storm being thrown against the window panes, there is the call of a koel just before dawn. There are faces that grow more understood with time, tales that are revealed, griefs that begin finally to understand each other.

When there is nowhere to leave for it is the heart that gets unmoored, spreading through the body like a light, like joy, hovering with hope at the surface of the skin. People become eyes that slowly fill, faces to be touched lightly with the back of the hand, hands to be raised to the lips, necks and hunched shoulders and backs hiding the sorrow that stands before the face. All of this while the moving, spreading heart pushes away its own torments.

The rain that falls past the airplane is without body, soundless, uncommitted. Near the mango tree, it is a monsoon day, brimming with rhythm and movement. The clouds pass overhead, light ebbs, the rain falls, water streams and flows on the asphalt, trees bend to

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gusts of wind, birds fly to their shelters, children cover their heads with fronds of palm and walk barefoot through the falling water.
In the dark night, the airplane circles a snowstorm sky.

★ ★ ★

Sub-Continent

The sub-continent lies back on the surface of the earth like a man full of abandon, his arms flung out on either side. Above, dark monsoon clouds move in from the ocean and gently break the back of the hard summer light. On a street like a vein on the sub-continent's body my mother, walking towards her puja room, looks out once at the clouds moving thick and fast and continues on her way.

Alexander of Macedon and his army had never seen rains like this before. Nearchus, Alexander's admiral, told of brass that rained from the sky in brazen drops. The historians call it invention but Nearchus knew what he had seen and heard. In my grandfather's grove so thick with banana trees that the sky could not be seen, the rain fell with the sound of festival dhaks so loud on the broad leaves, that he thought it was the season of harvests, of the Durga Pujas, and not the season of rain. It kept him awake for nights.

Alexander's army came to conquer, but had to retreat, surprised, before the vast rivers swollen with rain, rivers like seas that they could not cross without dying. Alexander's men refused to advance further. They were tired, they lay down their arms. The Greeks returned without much land or victory but they returned having seen this incredible rain, these rivers, and elephants and trees with white balls of cotton on them.

In the ancient house of my mother, the dining room ceiling caves in under cover of the sound of thunder. My mother who ignores natural processes, who has never had a landscape to live by, is forced to turn around and look at the piece of sky above her. The wind comes swirling into her wide open eyes. The rain falls into the bowls of neatly arranged food that she has cooked. It dilutes the yellow dal and floats on the mustard oil that surrounds the vegetables. With the gale in her eyes and the rain above and around her, my mother for once does not think of repair, she thinks of death. The fear that she has been losing, grain by grain, ever since her husband died and her daughter left, dissolves completely now in this transformed, rain filled house.

The ancestors gather to watch, my father, my grandfather, the

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great grandfather who had lost his riches to a tornado wind. Strong boned, quiet faced, liquid eyed, all the generations gather, generations going back to the riverine lands where they were first born, made love, died, and coming forward to the time when they fitted their spirits into cities, jostling each other with such innocent expectation and hope gathered in their large eyes, fitting themselves into these spaces of wall and window, where there was room only for questions, never for answers, and certainly not for a leaping of the heart. This is how time shrinks, say the ancestors as they watch, nodding their heads, and becomes as lean and emaciated as a white widow in a falling house. Their ancient hearts, filled with the rhythm of life after life, go out to my mother. Something is coming, thinks my mother, and it is more than the rain.

The Arabs, when they realised the existence of the monsoon winds, began to sail rapidly through the middle of the ocean to the sub-continent, instead of slowly floating along the coasts for months and months as they had done before. The monsoons were benevolent winds, blowing in a north-eastward direction across the Arabian sea in summer, aiding everyone on their way. Traders from the Mediterranean sailed along with them, bringing on their ships wine, coral, topaz, and most of all, gold, making the sub-continent breathless with opulence. The returning monsoon winds in the winter aided the ships back, ships on which the sub-continent sent spices, jewels, and lions, tigers, and elephants for the wild beast shows of Roman Emperors.

One whole wall gives way, this time creating its own thunder. It is the middle of the day, but through the space created by the fallen wall my mother can see that it is almost as dark as night. The rain does not fall straight down, but throws itself around in gales before it reaches the ground. Inside, as it hits the floor of the house, each drop forms a diminutive fountain as soon as it touches ground, the center still, the sides throwing themselves out.

The rain goes on for ten whole days and nights. The streets of the sub-continent flow like rivers. The water runs into houses setting tables and chairs afloat, making quiet the people who sit with their faces in their hands wondering whether this is the same rain they had prayed for, this rain that now brings so much grief. My mother is on the second floor, but the rain coming in through the broken walls and ceiling floods the house. My mother sits still in that flooding with a stillness suited to summer when nothing moves, but not to this season of the rains when all things become displaced. Inside her there is nothing, no love, no fear, no pain, only an immense emptiness.

When Job Charnock sailed up the river to Sutanutee, he could

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see nothing but water, the rains falling day and night around him, such rain as he, like Nearchus, had neither heard nor seen before. This was the original rain, before which nothing else had any meaning, and the fine drizzle in his own land seemed but an imitation, a smudged, unclear copy.

In this rain filled August when these swamps and marshlands were almost indistinguishable from the river they stood by, where wild beasts roamed in the jungles beyond, Charnock had a vision, as keen and sharp as a prophecy. On the banks of the swollen river he moored his boats and men and founded an Empire. In this fertile, watery land there sprouted trade and wealth and power. There were grand avenues lit by poignant gas lamps, houses into which the ancestors fitted their spirits. There sprouted the seeds and fruits of new learning unseparated from submission, there was born a child, the last in my riverine family, who would speak her deepest words with the same riverine lilt but in an alien tongue.

The monsoons float up over the ocean from somewhere below the equator. No one yet knows its reason and its source.

Days have passed and my mother has been watching the rain through the broken ceiling and walls. She has locked the puja room with a brass key, the thirteen small gods floating inside together with dead flowers. As my mother watches the rain she sees a man silently paddling a small boat down the dark water filled street. Something moves inside her, in a remote, speechless place. The next day the fish appear, small and silver. They swim in water that reflects the dark monsoon clouds above, sometimes they float to the surface. They leap high into the cloud filled air and then back into the water again. When the fish come my mother breaks the stillness, she breaks into song, my mother who has never before sung. *Ei udashi hawar pathe mukul guli jhare* ... In the path of this wistful wind the buds keep falling ... It is a song my father used to love.

After many days the rain eases suddenly and from somewhere behind all this darkness the sun throws a very faint light, no rays, no warmth, just a hue on leaves and trees and houses. The darkness still remains, though touched in places by this faint forefinger of light, creating a sky where everything merges, flows and leaks into the other without a knowledge of sources and endings. It is a sky of great forgiveness.

My mother leaves now her falling house, behind her the dead ancestors, freed from brick and stone, relieved, behind her my dead father whose living look of torment and alarm for her has been replaced by a calm, tender concern. My mother turns away, forever,

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from this house. On the road, filled with water till the waist, boys sail paper boats, silently. They turn as they see an old woman in a white sari wading slowly through the dark water. She has on no blouse, like a village woman, and her sari covers her thin, old breasts. She passes the monkey man, standing with monkeys so wet that their fur sticks together in small clumps. She passes the ragpicker who cannot save his rags from the rain and has floated his torn jute bag on the water. She passes the bearded *ektara* player who holds his *ektara* close to his chest. She looks at the wanderers she had never before understood.

The sub-continent bears gently, gently, my mother, in the crook of its left arm. The monsoon winds come in from the bay and pass right through her emptiness of heart, creating a breath of joy that she herself can feel but not yet understand. There are questions in the eyes of those who watch her wade by, but not in my mother. The sub-continent, full of abandon, knows neither repentance, nor mistakes, nor redemption, it knows only how to live everything and then put it all behind, seasons and history and geological change. Who can understand what change is? The sub-continent bears gently, gently, my mother, in the crook of its left arm, as deserts are overtaken by forests, and flat lands rise slowly into hills. □

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INTERVIEW

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Bhisham Sahni/Pankaj K. Singh

(This conversation took place in two sessions on 16 and 19 Nov. 1994, at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, where Bhisham Sahni is currently a National Fellow.)

PKS : Your mother tongue is Punjabi and you have taught English literature all your life. How is it that you chose Hindi as the language for your creative expression?

Sahni : I was born in an Arya Samaj family. My father was a great enthusiast for Hindi and Sanskrit. He put me in a Gurukul for sometime. We had a tutor of Hindi and Sanskrit for many years. When I took to writing I felt I could write with greater self-confidence in Hindi.

PKS : You have equal control on the form of novel and drama. You started with short story ...

Sahni : No, everybody starts with poetry so did I. It didn't take me long to be wise about it. Then I started writing stories. But it was more or less a pastime in the beginning. During school and college days it never occurred to me that I'd take to writing seriously. It was after graduation when I went to Rawalpindi and joined my father in business that I felt drawn towards writing. Perhaps it was when I found myself a misfit in business that I began to long for literature. Even then I would not write regularly. Occasionally a story or an article on some cultural subject. After partition I became more regular. There was also a cultural forum in which I found a scope for reading out my stories and that encouraged me further.

PKS : Partition has certainly left an impact on you, it recurs so often in your writing ...

Sahni : It was not the Partition alone, it was the

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continuance of that atmosphere of separatism, charged with communal tensions which became a disturbing factor.

PKS : *Tamas* of course is directly located in the time of Partition but your recent novel *Kunto* also you place in around the same time ...

Sahni : *Kunto* does not deal with social problems. It tells the story of domestic relations against the background of mounting communal crisis. Moreover, I feel that even a story relating to the private life of an individual somewhere gets related to the social milieu in which we are living. You can't view an individual in isolation but in his context and that context is social milieu.

PKS : Any specific reasons for placing *Kunto* in the pre-Partition days?

Sahni : I don't know. I had written *Maiyadas ki Mari* that ended with the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. I thought this would be a continuation of that novel in time.

PKS : *Tamas* is certainly the most popular of your works and has been translated into more Indian and foreign languages than your other works. Which one do you consider your best?

Sahni : *Maiyadas ki Mari.* I like it the most.

PKS : Would you like to elaborate?

Sahni : Yes. *Tamas* is largely based on my own experience and observation. *Maiyadas ki Mari* is placed in the nineteenth century. It put many demands on my creative imagination, became a bit of challenge, if I could do justice to it. I believe by the very nature of theme a certain sense of distance developed, when I felt I was involved in it and yet out of it, yet detached from it. And so far as incidents and characters have been concerned they were largely the result of my mental involvement with those times, and not drawn from life directly. I also felt a little more free in writing it. Since I was writing about my hometown, i.e. Bera, to which I originally belonged, some sort of nostalgia also played a part, not only in terms of customs, language, place, my ancestors but also in terms of the turbulances of the time, the collapse of the Sikh and the emergence of the British, and the characters in Sikh history.

PKS : Did you do some research for this novel?

Sahni : Yes, I did make some study. One question used to bother me. This town was a medieval town located by the side of river Jhelum. It was a flourishing town but later on the

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course of the river changed and it came to a gradual decline. Trade routes were changed. People moved to other places for better business prospects. Gradually the town was a deserted town. It forms a background to the emergence of a new regime.

PKS : Did you also research for your play *Kabira Khara Bazar Mein*? And how much of it is based on actual accounts of Kabir's life?

Sahni : I read Hazari Parasad Dwivedi's book which is very good. I also read whatever I could lay hands on. I drew the verses of Kabir from that book. But most of it is the creation of my imagination, e.g. the scene between Kabir and his wife Loi, the dialogue between Kaistha and the Kotwal, the scene with the Kotwal where the blind beggar is lashed to death. What I wanted to show through the beggar was that that was one of the methods chosen by Kabir to propagate his ideas.

PKS : How did you first decide about writing a play?

Sahni : The play was *Hanush*. Sheela and I went to Europe. Nirmal was there. He showed us around. He showed me this tower clock and told me the story. I felt it could be told as a play. It had a dramatic element in it. At Moscow I got in touch with the Czech embassy. They were helpful in providing some information, which had appeared in journals, on this event of fourteenth or fifteenth century. A friend's wife translated Czech language. So with some basic material I wrote it. Came to India and showed it to my brother. He didn't like it. In fact he said I should not write plays. But once you have worked on something you can't throw it away. It keeps on bothering you. I kept on working on it. It has some weaknesses, for example, long dialogues—which could have been avoided. There were other discouraging responses. I gave it to Alkazi and he sat on it for two months. I virtually quarrelled with him and took it back. Rajinder Nath was looking for a play for a drama festival and he was the first director of the play. It got a prize for the script. So I felt encouraged.

PKS : How did you come upon the idea of writing *Madhavi*?

Sahni : The story of *Madhavi* as it occurs in the *Mahabharata* was told to me by Trilochan Shastri, a well-known Hindi poet, during a railway journey. As I heard the story I felt that it could lend itself to dramatic treatment. I took down a brief

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outline of the story there and then and later consulted the *Mahabharata* for full details.

PKS : Were you conscious that you were writing a strong feminist text? Its images, e.g. in the court of the first king, and its language strongly communicate the fact of commodification of Madhavi, and she in turn interrogates the patriarchal code. Were you consciously critiquing the traditional narrative?

Sahni : The 'feminist' aspect emerged even as I heard the story. But it was not this aspect that struck me as the most vital. It began to receive greater and greater emphasis as I wrote the play. The scene in which the court astrologer reads and interprets the significance of different parts of her body is taken from the *Mahabharata*. The ironic turn and emphasis are given by me. The love story between Galav and Madhavi is my own invention.

PKS : In *Muavze* you choose an entirely different style, humour of a grotesque, macabre kind, even though the basic situation is tragic, almost pessimistic ...

Sahni : In *Muavze* the style of grotesque humour was deliberately chosen. At times laughter is the best way to express the increasing cynicism in society.

PKS : "Language" is one of your greatest strength. Have you ever felt that language fails you, remains insufficient for expressing what you want to convey?

Sahni : Every writer, to a certain extent, creates his own language. I believe in restraint but I also wish to be able to express intensity of passion or subtlety of thought within the limitations imposed by restraint. I have never felt that language has failed me, but I have often felt the inadequacy of my knowledge of the language. Words in literature play an evocative role more than an expressive one.

PKS : In the Prefaces to *Hanush* and *Kabira Khara Bazar Mein* you give some credit to the directors for polishing the final form. How did you find the performances of *Madhavi* and *Muavze*? Have you been sometimes dissatisfied with any performances of your plays?

Sahni : I have seen only one performance of *Madhavi* on the stage, produced by an amateur group, which was rather raw, but it did succeed in putting across the inner content of the play. It also made me conscious of some of the technical weaknesses of the play.

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As regards *Muavze,* though a production of the National School of Drama, I was not happy with the director's handling of the play. At places it tended to be farcical.

No dramatic presentation gives full satisfaction particularly when we know the handicaps under which our dramatic groups are functioning. Our expectations, however, are greater from good directors.

PKS : How would you state the relative value or status of the written text of drama and its performance?

Sahni : In a performance, the script serves only as one of the assets, though a very vital one. Other dimensions are added and they assume great importance. The performance gives an opportunity to the actor to express his histrionic talents, similarly to the director whose contribution is as creative as the writer's. Sets, costumes, lighting, all play a vital role.

PKS : What do you see as essential ingredients of a dramatic text?

Sahni : Drama. Its dramatic quality or potential.

PKS : Is there anything which can be defined as the "Indian aesthetic" in contemporary drama?

Sahni : The main trend in Indian (Hindi) drama is towards realism. Structurally, I think, it is influenced by western drama, and personally, I think it is a good thing. But some of the classical forms are also being revived and even classical folk forms such as Yakshgan etc. Often enough, some elements of the old folk or classical form are put into realistic drama also, such as Sutradhar, dance and music sequences.

A classical production has to be viewed differently if one wants to enjoy it. One should not expect action oriented movement of the play, nor regard dance and music sequence as intrusions. Indian aesthetic in some respects is certainly different.

PKS : Why do you think drama fails to become a major, more visible expression of creative urge in India.

Sahni : There are many reasons. In North India there was a long break in the growth and development of the dramatic art. Classical drama had flourished in a rather rarified atmosphere, and if this long break had not come, drama would have continued to develop in accordance with the needs of the changing times. I feel that in North India it got uprooted from its soil, and went out of the cultural life of society. Today's environment, with the radio, the cinema and the TV intruding so powerfully, the theatre has been sidelined.

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In some other parts of India, this is not the case, and there, such as in Bengal, Maharashtra and the South, it continues to be one of the major 'expressions of the creative urge.'

PKS : How do you find the contemporary scene in Hindi drama?

Sahni : A lot is being written in this genre, but I still feel that Hindi drama has not yet found its moorings.

PKS : How far do you think National School of Drama has contributed or can contribute to the growth or practice of drama?

Sahni : NSD has made and is making significant contribution in the sphere of dramatic presentations. The general level of dramatic production has distinctly risen; trained, experienced actors and actresses have emerged; it is setting new standards; its graduates are now found working in films, on TV etc. such as Om Puri, Nasiruddin Shah, Uttra Baokar, etc. enriching the dramatic presentations with their art.

PKS : Do you write with a compulsion or an aim?

Sahni : The compulsion is there but not motivated by any 'aim.'

PKS : What role do you assign a creative writer in society?

Sahni : Largely, the writer's role in society continues to be the same as it has been through the centuries—to present a mirror to life. But at times, the emphasis has been shifting—sometimes towards didacticism, sometimes towards exhortation to achieve a social goal, sometimes towards pure aestheticism. In court poetry, poets wrote panegyrics etc.

PKS : In your novels and short stories you often return to recent history, much of it almost being 'contemporary history' which you yourself have lived and seen. However, in your plays you often go back to the more distant past of myth and legend, in *Kabira* or *Madhavi* for example. Any specific reasons for this return to the narratives of the past?

Sahni : There is no special reason. The theme of *Kabira Khara Bazar Mein* I chose consciously because Kabir's social philosophy was very relevant to our times, but the others, *Madhavi* and *Hanush,* I only chanced upon their stories. Of course they struck a chord somewhere rousing very contemporary emotions and reflections.

PKS : How would you describe the role of myth or legend in a society, and in literature?

Sahni : Myth and legend are powerful illustrative media, both in society and in literature. In literature, a myth or legend distances itself from contemporary reality, thereby bringing the latter into greater relief.

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PKS : What power would you attribute to literary textuality in the cultural or political context of a society?

Sahni : Nothing beyond imparting awareness, and bringing social reality into a perspective and a sense of identification with it.

PKS : Did you have any role models in your mind, or any specific authors who have influenced your creative writing?

Sahni : Every writer is open to influences. Sometimes stray reflections on life expressed by even a minor writer serve as a revelation. With major writers, their vision of life is the most impressive thing about them. The way they handle their themes, their turn of phrase, their language, composition, all add to a writer's store.

I have had no 'models' in my mind as such, but among fiction writers I have been most impressed by Leo Tolstoy.

PKS : What is the role of 'craft' in creative writing?

Sahni : Craft is important in the same way as language is important, You learn both, but use them intuitively. In craft you are somewhere more conscious in its use. In drama, for instance, craft will teach you how to juxtapose scenes, where brevity is needed, the length of scenes etc. In fiction, when and how to plunge into the narrative—you need not begin every scene from the beginning etc.

PKS : Visual images are very strong in your fiction as well, Basanti's story framed in the pulling down of shantis or the jumping of women into a well in *Tamas* ...

Sahni : I had gone to 'Thoha Khalsa' in Rawalpindi district to see the well into which Sikh women had jumped during the riots, to escape being caught by marauders.

The village, on the bank of a stream, with an orchard on the other side, nestled in idyllic surroundings. But it was virtually deserted. Even the echoes from our footsteps in the lonely, narrow streets were frightening. A few residents of the village had accompanied us from Rawalpindi. The Health Officer of the town was going there to pour disinfectant into the well and we had accompanied him.

The well presented a horrid sight. Bloated bodies of women, young and old, with little children entangled between their legs or held in their arms looked gruesome. The bodies had come up to the surface on top of the well.

I remember a young Sardar, nudging me at the elbow and saying to me, "That, there is my wife, with a gold bracelet on her wrist. Do you see? I got her that gold bracelet. Please

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help me get the bracelet. I need it I have nothing to live on." He was crazy with grief and sense of destitution.

During our return journey by bus another Sardar, elderly and unkempt, lay down on the floor of the bus, and kept cracking crazy jokes, including his fear of being circumcised by the Muslim marauders ...

PKS : One of the consistent virtues of your work has been a sympathetic, sensitive portrayal of the ordeals of woman, not only in woman-centred works like *Madhavi, Basanti* or *Kunto* but even in *Maiyadas ki Mari, Kiran* and *Jharokhe* ...

Sahni : It is the imaginative sympathy of the writer, whether male or female, which counts. In a man's life woman always holds a special place, whether he exploits her or not. So far as doing justice to a woman character is concerned, the repression to which she is subjected in our social life is very obvious.

Except Madhavi all my female characters have been taken from life, though they evolved considerably during the course of writing. For instance, Rukmini in *Maiyadas ki Mari,* I merely placed her in that situation in which she is cruelly married off to an invalid. I believe it was Rukmini who was asserting her individuality after that. I had not drawn the character from my own life, it was my mother who told me her story. Basanti remains closest to the original.

I do not regard myself as a feminist writer. I think in people whose writing is socially oriented, your attention is bound to go towards the injustice being done to women. Not that women did not practise high-handedness but on the whole in a male-dominated society woman is at the mercy of man's whims, dependent on him, the result of laws operating in a patriarchal society.

PKS : Most of your work has a solemn almost tragic tone, even though when you handle humour and irony you do it exceedingly well e.g. in *Muavze* or in a story like "Leela Nandlal Ki". Have you been rather shy of venturing into humour?

Sahni : I am not shy of venturing into humour. I love humour and would like to exercise it as best as I can. It is the best corrective to subjective kite-flying and has a down-to-earth quality about it which is very valuable for a writer.

PKS : You have been acting on the stage right from your college days and later in IPTA in mid 1940s. You have also worked in some films. You never thought of taking to acting as your primary profession, specially when your brother Balraj Sahni

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was already a celebrity in cinema?

Sahni : Cinema was not my first love though theatre had a fascination for me for a long time. To seek self-expression through acting on the stage or in the films never became a strong passion.

PKS : How did you relate to your brother and how do you remember him most?

Sahni : I was very fond of my brother and for long hero-worshipped him. He was a loving brother. I admired him for his bold initiatives, the courage of his convictions and the fearless stand he took on many occasions. I remember him for his warm, radiant personality. I also hold him in high esteem as a consummate character actor.

PKS : What advice would you like to give to the translators of creative writing from your experience of translating Tolstoy?

Sahni : Someone had remarked that for a translator the knowledge of his own language is far more important than the language from which he is translating. I agree with this. Besides, more than words or their literal meaning, it is the feeling or the thought that requires a translator's attention. I attach much importance to lucidity, fluency and ease in translation. Literal, word for word, translation becomes odious. But I do not believe in taking any liberties with what the author has written. For this, strict discipline and diligence are required.

PKS : From your first short-story in the school magazine to your recent one "Chehre" in *India Today* you have covered a long and prolific span of more than sixty years. How do you feel looking back?

Sahni : Every story that a writer writes is, in a way, his first story. He may have got the hang of the genre to a certain extent, but otherwise the challenge and the subsequent endeavour are the same.

PKS : What are your currently working on?

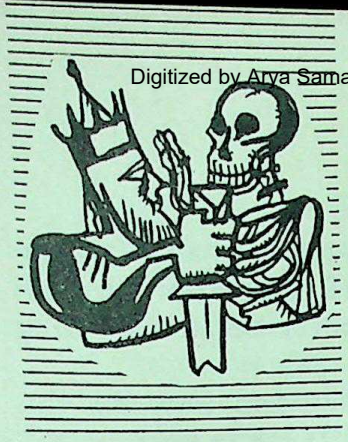
Sahni : I am presently working on a full length play with a historical theme.

PKS : You have been a socially committed writer all through. How do you feel at the current transitions in the economic and cultural fields?

Sahni : We are passing through a transitional phase. The end of the tunnel is not yet in sight. But there are apprehensions, misgivings and at times hopes also, about the future. □

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NEPTUNE'S FURY

Manoranjan Das

Introduction

MANORANJAN DAS (b. 1921) is perhaps the greatest living Oriya playwright today. He is one of the few dramatists in Indian languages whose works are both unpretentious in style and wonderfully varied in tone. His understanding of human situations is most authentic, his treatment of characters superb.

Born at Jharkata-Patna, Das was educated at Ravenshaw College, Cuttack. After his graduation he served the All India Radio, Cuttack in various capacities: he was Sub-Editor, Regional News, Senior Producer, Drama besides being Producer Emeritus, Akashvani/Doordarshan during 1984-87. Das was the Secretary of three State Akademies at different periods: Orissa Sahitya Akademi, Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi and Orissa Lalit Kala Akademi. He is now a member of the Executive Committee, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

Das has a tremendous sense of drama in him and he started writing scripts for the stage from his student days. *Jauban,* his first play to be staged by Annapurna Theatre, Cuttack in 1944 gives a call to the youth to work for the emancipation of the country from bondage. The plays, *August Na* (1947), *Baxi Jajabandhu* (1949), *Agami* (1949) and *Abarodha* (1951) are based on contemporary socio-political themes.

Das has written a number of short plays as well as one-act-plays which were broadcast on AIR. These radio plays were later converted to stage plays and published under the title, *Chhota Natak* which won for him the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award in 1964. The playwright probes into human mind in his short as well as full length plays. Sitakant Mahapatra rightly observes: "*Mahasamudra* which is a collection of small plays and one-act-plays reveals one aspect of Manoranjan's

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excellence as a playwright." It "delineates strange complexities of character and its psychic levels in a small and limited framework" (Mahapatra, *Comparative Indian Literature,* ed. K.M. George, Macmillan/Kerala Sahitya Akademi).

Das is involved in radio-production as well as stage production of plays. When 'Srujani' the famous theatre group of Orissa was established in 1964, for it, he wrote plays: *Banahansi, Aranya Phasal, Amrutasya Putrah, Katha Ghoda, Urmi, Sabdalipi, Klanta Prajapati, Bitarkita Aparahna* and *Nandika Keshari. Banahansi* got the critical acclaim of the audience: it was considered a "turning point" in Oriya drama.

> Many an eyebrow must have been raised to see *Banahansi* with an absolutely abstract idea that represents intricate working of the minds. But a change, a distinct departure in idea is in evidence. May be it will be a turning point.
>
> ("Review", *Amrita Bazar Patrika,* June 1968)

Aranya Phasal, the play that won for him the Central Sahitya Akademi award, is considered his masterpiece. Hypocrisy of modern man and his suppressed desire find expression in a symbolic language. It also shows the alienation of man, his own separate existence. Professor B. Das rightly observes that the "dialogues are often in stichomythia, staccato in rhythm" and they suggest "the restlessness, anxiety and tension which characterize modern man" ("Foreword", *The Wild Harvest,* Calcutta, OUP, 1979). In *Kathaghoda,* Das has adopted the form of traditional folk theatre to present the horror of a dehumanized society. *Bitarkita Aparahna* deals with the theme of generation-gap whereas his Sarala-Award winning play, *Nandika Keshari* is based on a popular legend of Orissa.

Manoranjan Das is the recipient of a number of awards: Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award, 1964; Central Sahitya Akademi Award, 1971; Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, 1978; Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, 1981; Sarala Award, 1990 and Governor's Plaque of Honour, 1992.

The short play, "Neptune's Fury" is the English rendering of "Mahodadhi" included in the collection, *Bichitra Manara Natak.* Originally written as a radioplay it has five characters in all. The entire play has two locations: a house on the seashore at Puri and the Puri sea beach besides the location of the small flashback scene. Suchitra, a lecturer in Psychology, a young widow undergoes tremendous psychological tension. Her husband, Abhijit did not treat her with care when he was alive; he was murdered by a man whose wife was

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allegedly raped by him. Sushovan, found unconscious on the seashore by Suchitra and her sister-in-law Jita, was convalescing in their house after being relieved from hospital. He suffers from a mental shock and is oblivious of his past. Gradually he revives his memory and remembers how Sipra, his wife was raped in their little nest in Vizag. He pleads for sympathy and understanding, which he gets from Suchitra. Rudranarayan, Abhijit's father identifies Sushovan to be the killer. He wants to avenge his son's murder and plans to take him to the seashore at 3 O'clock in the night for the purpose. He seeks the help of Suchitra, who, he thinks, has to settle a score in taking revenge. But Suchitra shows her understanding of Sushovan and begs him to leave the place at once. Sushovan wonders if he would ever find the same understanding from anyone else. At the end it was found that both of them are not there in the house. Their footsteps lead to the sea where they have gone to an eternal quest.

Arun Kumar Mohanty

SCENE I

A house on the sea beach. A little while before sunrise. A muffled roar of the sea in the background. A window facing the sea opens. The sound increases as the window opens. The morning bells from a temple are heard and gradually subside: the sound of the waves becomes audible once again.

Suchitra looks at the sea through the window. A little later, Jita comes, stands on the doorway and calls ....

Jita : Bhauja ...
Suchitra : Yes ...
Jita : (Coming Closer) you were a lecturer, weren't you?
Suchitra : I ... I ...
Jita : A lecturer in Psychology.
Suchitra : Jita ...!
Jita : Tell me then—"It's not yet dawn, the crow has not cawed, but why are you up so early dear?"
Suchitra : Jita ... !
Jita : You can't tell ... let me tell ...
Suchitra : What?
Jita : You are thinking ...
Suchitra : Jita!
Jita : Why do you stand at the window, facing the sea every morning, and brood?

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Suchitra : What am I thinking, Jita?
Jita : No dear, I won't let you brood like that.
Suchitra : But now that you have got up so early?
Jita : I wouldn't have got up so early. It's not yet dawn ... the sun has not risen ... The beach is not crowded yet. The cold wind of the morning is still blowing ... Tourists in their various coloured dress have not yet come to the sandy beach. Vendors selling mixture in small paper packets are yet to come to the shore ... Fishermen have not gone into the sea ...
Suchitra : Ah! Stop there ...
Jita : Not quite. I have not finished. Lily, Lily ... (a dog comes to her and makes some sort of sound in fond affection). This Lily ... when you left the bed came from your room to mine and made the sound ...
Suchitra : O ... Lily! (Lily barks ... this time a little louder)
Jita : How could I sleep? I had to get up ... get up to find you looking at the sea ... overwhelmed with emotion ... (after a moment's silence). You are crying, dear?
Suchitra : Jita ...
Jita : Is that sorrow only yours, my dear ... ? Is it not ours as well? But ...
Suchitra : No ... no ... why should I cry?
Jita : Don't lie to me, please.
Suchitra : No, no ...
Jita : My dear ...
Suchitra : What?
Jita : Let's go ...
Suchitra : Where?
Jita : To the seashore ... let's take a walk.
Suchitra : At this hour?
Jita : Yes. It'll be quite a fun. People have not got up ... the beach is not crowded. You and I will walk on the margin of water before sunrise ... and of course, Lily will be with us; I request you, sister ... I know, you'll like it.
Suchitra : But so early ...
Jita : Never have you been there at this hour. That's why I ask you. Don't tell me 'no'. You'll like it very much.
Suchitra : Jita!
Jita : Besides, I shall leave the place after a few days. You told me the other day ... you won't go. You will stay here a little longer. Will this opportunity come again? Don't tell

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me 'no', dear. Let us go ...

Suchitra : You are still like a child ...

Jita : Ain't I a child?

Suchitra : You are.

Jita : Then you pamper me ... or else, I shall ...

Suchitra : Cry?

Jita : Not in silence like you ... with tears rolling down the cheek ... I shall cry aloud (she starts crying aloud in order to demonstrate ... how)

Suchitra : You needn't cry ...

Jita : (Merrily) I know ... my dear sister-in-law will agree with my proposal ... I know.

Suchitra : Okay ...

Jita : It'll be quite a fun ... quite a fun.

Suchitra : You won't leave me ...

Jita : No, I won't ... come. Come, Lily. No ... go ahead ... lead the way. (Lily leads the way, barking. Sound gradually fades).

SCENE II

(Sound of sea waves becomes clearer. Suchitra and Jita have reached the seashore).

Suchitra : I don't like to move about.

Jita : Let's sit here then.

Suchitra : Yes, on this mound of sand

Jita : (Loudly) Lily ...

Suchitra : Ah ... let her move about a bit ...

Jita : Not moving about ... see, how she walks on the foamy margin of water and proceeds to the casuarina trees.

Suchitra : (Loudly) Lily ...

Jita : No, she won't listen to you now.

Suchitra : Perhaps she is running after the small red sea crabs.

Jita : Perhaps when she is tired, she will return of her own.

Suchitra : Sit.

Jita : (After a moment's silence) It is really pleasant, isn't it?

Suchitra : Yes. It's good.

Jita : Good or pleasant?

Suchitra : Good.

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Jita : Bhauja!
Suchitra : See, how Lily runs ... Probably, she also feels good.
Jita : May I ask you something?
Suchitra : What?
Jita : Father has written, he will come and I have to go with him.
Suchitra : Yes, your college will reopen.
Jita : And you?
Suchitra : I?
Jita : How long will you stay here?
Suchitra : How long? (a long breath) who knows?
Jita : Console yourself, dear ...
Suchitra : Console? (with a dry smile) Yes, I shall console myself.
Jita : When would father come, he wrote?
Suchitra : Not very certain. He wrote, he would come after his work was over ... he might come any day.
(The dog barks from a distance. Gradually the sound increases)
What happened? (Loudly) Lily ... Lily ...
Jita : Probably she has seen something on the margin ... she is barking around it ... come, dear ... let's go there and see ... (she proceeds, shouting)
Lily ... Lily ...
(The dog continues to bark)
Jita : (From a distance) Hurry up, dear, hurry up. Someone is lying on the margin.
Suchitra : Lying on the margin!
Jita : (From a distance) Hurry up, dear ... be quick.
Suchitra : Coming.
(She reaches the spot. Sound of the dog's barking becomes louder)
Jita : See, if he is dead.
Suchitra : (Terrified) Dead?
Jita : Be silent, Lily ... be quiet.
(The dog barks intermittantly)
Suchitra : No, probably he is not dead.
Jita : What shall we do?
Suchitra : Hold him ... let us carry him up ...
Jita : Yes ... be calm, Lily ... shut up.
(Both of them pull an inert body. Their facial and body expressions show, they are tired. Sound of the waves of the sea is heard in the sound track.)

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SCENE III

(A dining hall. Cups, plates are on the table, Breakfast is ready Rudranarayan is taking breakfast. Jita is serving him food)

Jita : Have something more, father!
Rudra : No.
Jita : One more piece of parantha ...
Rudra : No.
Jita : Your appetite has clawed, father.
Rudra : I have already consumed six paranthas and a double poach ... and you tell me that I have lost my appetite?
Jita : ... some more fried potato ...
Rudra : (Taking water) No ...
Jita : Do you think six paranthas are more?
Rudra : No (with a long breath) Now I feel I don't live to eat ... I eat to live.
Jita : Father!
Rudra : Those days are gone dear ... Morning walk is one of the few good habits I have maintained even after my retirement ... Both of us, the father and the son, sit at the breakfast table ... Either your mother or Suchitra serve hot paranthas—one after another. Abhijit and I compete with each other. But now ... let me stop it ... why the topic again? ... Is the tea still hot?
Jita : Yes. Here I pour, father.
(Jita pours tea into the cup).
Rudra : Sit down. (After a moment's silence) Do you notice any change in Suchitra?
Jita : No, father ... nothing like that.
Rudra : Oh ...
Jita : She is always indifferent ... doesn't talk usually ... hardly speaks a word ... always looks at the sea through the window of her bedroom, Father, I have done my best to bring about some change in her mind. I am always with her ... I have forced her to go out with me ... only the other day she was shedding tears at the windowsill. I took her to the seashore ... at the early hours of dawn. We were sitting on the mound of sand ... and then ...
Rudra : Last evening I went to the hospital.
Jita : Thank God ... the man survived. If Lily had not reached there smelling ... At first we thought he was dead.

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Rudra : God's will! You have done a good thing ...
Jita : Did the doctor tell you anything more about him?
Rudra : I talked to Dr. Patnaik about him. He told me that the man was out of danger. He might take a few more days to get back his memory. All that he needs now is a little rest ... good nursing. (Sound of a car parking) Probably Suchitra has come back.
Jita : I think so. She went to the hospital early in the morning.
Rudra : Why did you not accompany her?
Jita : You were asleep. She told me to serve you tea after you got up. She wanted to go to hospital ...
Rudra : Good.
Jita : What, father?
Rudra : Mind gets refreshed if there is something to do. But sitting alone ...
Jita : (Suddenly looking after) Bhauja there ... we here ...
Suchitra : (Entering) You have got up so early today, Father.
Jita : As you told me ... I have already served him breakfast.
Rudra : You had told, dear ...
Suchitra : (Feeling guilty) I ... in the morning ...
Rudra : Okay ... There is no problem. Sit down, you have not taken tea probably ... Jita ...
Suchitra : I shall take it afterwards, Father.
Rudra : Sit down. (Pulling a chair). Last night after I talked to Dr. Patnaik about Sushovan ... I thought of it late into the night ... The doctor was telling ...
Suchitra : Yes, he told me too.
Rudra : I think we should bring Sushovan here.
Suchitra : Father!
Rudra : Whether it was just an accident or an attempt to commit suicide ... There has to be a formal police case ... I has been filed. The Police will investigate the case ... But his treatment ... his nursing ...
Suchitra : You mean ... you want ...
Rudra : We will bring him here. He can be treated at this place .... After he recovers completely ...
Suchitra : (with a note of protest) But ...
Rudra : What do you think?
Suchitra : We don't know him. Who is he? Where is he from? What does he do? We know nothing of him ...
Rudra : You mean ...
Suchitra : We have done what we should have. Anything more ...

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Rudra : (with a smile) What is wrong there?
Suchitra : But ...
Jita : Once Father has decided, your trump card will not do, sister.
Suchitra : But ...
Rudra : Why "but" again? After he recovers, he will get back his memory. Everything will be known then ... who is he ... what does he do ... whether it is an accident or suicide attempt ... Besides ...
Suchitra : Besides what, father?
Rudra : It will be a sort of engagement for you.
Jita : That will be fine, my dear. We have saved him ... we will also help in his recovery.
Suchitra : But you will leave soon.
Rudra : No. I think Jita should stay here for a few days more ... at least till my return from Vizag.
Suchitra : You ... Vizag ...
Rudra : Is it not my duty to assist the Police there? Besides, the father in me wants to know the man responsible for our destruction ... (out of pain and distress) ah ... !
Suchitra : Father!
Jita : Father!
Rudra : No. I have never been weak ... I shall not be so now. If possible, I shall send Mantu from Vizag. Do that, my dear ... make arrangements to bring Sushovan from hospital.
Suchitra : So you have ...
Rudra : No. I have not yet made up my mind. If it is not inconvenient, I shall go to Vizag after a couple of days. Or, I may go even today. I shall do as I feel it convenient ... (to Jita) Go, my darling ... prepare tea for Suchitra ... you too haven't taken.
Jita : Both of us are going to take, father.
Rudra : Okay .. Okay ... (exit)
Jita : (Pouring tea from the Kettle) Your tea, sister ... (after a pause) what are you thinking again?
Suchitra : (conscious) Eh! No ... nothing ... give me tea. (Both Suchitra and Jita take tea).

SCENE IV

(A room in the house of Rudranarayan, Sushovan, is convalescing there.

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He sips tea from the cup, Suchitra enters)

Sushovan : No!
Suchitra : (Entering, from a distance ...) what happened? Don't you like the tea?
Sushovan : No, the tea is fine.
Suchitra : But you put aside the cup ...
Sushovan : I didn't like it.
Suchitra : You said ... the tea was good.
Sushovan : Did I say so?
Suchitra : Bah! Didn't you say so?
Sushovan : So it is good.
Suchitra : Take it, please.
Sushovan : Oh ... Yes ... (again sipping tea) You?
Suchitra : I ..., I ... later ...
(A long silence)
Sushovan : What is her name?
Suchitra : Who? Whose name?
Sushovan : Whose name did I ask ...?
Suchitra : Don't you remember?
Sushovan : Did I ask you your name?
Suchitra : But I have already told you my name.
Sushovan : What's it?
Suchitra : Suchitra.
Sushovan : Yes, Suchitra ... no, no, ... the other one.
Suchitra : Who? Jita?
Sushovan : Yes, Jita ... a strange girl.
Suchitra : (smilingly) why ... what happened?
Sushovan : About what?
Suchitra : What did Jita tell you?
Sushovan : Told me?
Suchitra : Leave it, if you don't remember.
Sushovan : Don't remember ... What do you mean? Why? What happened to me?
Suchitra : No, nothing has happened to you.
Sushovan : Yes, I remember ...
Suchitra : What?
Sushovan : She told me, I don't remember the past.
Suchitra : Jita told you?
Sushovan : And I ...
Suchitra : What?
Sushovan : How did we know each other?

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Suchitra : How?
Sushovan : You tell me. Everything is hazy before me ... I ... Did I really lay on the shore?
Suchitra : We found you there. You were unconscious. We took you to hospital. You regained consciousness there. The doctor said ...
Sushovan : What!
Suchitra : No, no, nothing has happened to you. You will recover completely.
Sushovan : Oh!
Suchitra : What do you think?
Sushovan : What is her name you said ... Rita? ...
Suchitra : Jita.
Sushovan : Yes, Jita. Jita told me ... you all guard me. You don't let me go out.
Suchitra : Jita told you this?
Sushovan : As the hunter watches the prey, the police guards the criminal, the warder keeps an eye on the prisoners ...
Suchitra : (Smilingly) But you are no criminal ... nor prisoner.
Sushovan : (In distress) No, no, I am no prisoner, no criminal. I ... I ...
Suchitra : What happened? Where are you going? Wait ... stay there ... listen (She tries to hold him, prevent him from going).
Sushovan : What? Why have you stopped me? Why do you detain me here forcibly? Leave me ... leave me ...
Suchitra : Where will you go?
Sushovan : Ah ... I feel suffocated here ... I need air ... free air ... I shall go to the shore. Sea ... wave after wave ... I alone will go into the sea ...
Suchitra : No ... You can't go. Sit there. Don't be childish.
Sushovan : So you will forcibly ...
Suchitra : Not by force ... you needn't go to the seashore now. Stay here ... I am here with you, Jita has gone out ... she will return soon. She will also sit by you. We'll talk about many things. Let me open the window ... the sea breeze will fill the room ... you will like it. (She opens the window. Sound of the sea waves is heard).
Sushovan : Yes, I like it ... (after a brief silence) I like it very much. Why do you keep standing? Sit down.
Suchitra : Shall I bring something to eat?
Sushovan : No.
Suchitra : How will you recover if you take so little food? (Silence)

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Sushovan : Shall I tell you something?
Suchitra : What?
Sushovan : A little earlier you stood in front of me.
Suchitra : Yes.
Sushovan : You held me by my arms ... prevented me from going out.
Suchitra : Why did you suddenly move to go to the shore?
Sushovan : After you held me by my arms ...
Suchitra : Oh!
Sushovan : You ...
Suchitra : You ...
Sushovan : I ... I ... I ...
Suchitra : (affectionately) Sushovan ...
Sushovan : Sushovan?
Suchitra : (in distress) Sushovan ...
Sushovan : Who do you call? Who is Sushovan?
Suchitra : You ... yourself.
Sushovan : I ... no ... I am not Sushovan.
Suchitra : So then ...
Sushovan : How do you know, I am Sushovan?
Suchitra : When we brought you from water ...
Sushovan : (thinking ...) Sushovan ... Sushovan ...
Suchitra : The ring in your finger ... and the letters on it ... Sushovan ...
Sushovan : Where is the ring?
Suchitra : It's there. Shall I bring it?
Sushovan : No ...
Suchitra : But why did you tell me you were not Sushovan?
Sushovan : So, I am Sushovan?
Suchitra : Who are you then? That was your only identity we know, which you now disown ... who are you? Where is your home? What did you do? Why did you come here? It was not yet morning ... why did you come to the seashore? Suicide or accident ... Oh ... what a problem!
(Sound of a calling bell)
Sushovan : Who could be ...
Suchitra : Jita, I suppose.
Sushovan : How do you know?
Suchitra : Lily would have barked had there been anyone else.
Sushovan : Wait. Let me go and open the door.
Suchitra : You?
Sushovan : (Proceeds) I feel better ...
Suchitra : (in distress) Oh! ...

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(Door opens. A little later ...)

Sushovan : (Getting in) Come in, please.
Suchitra : But you?
Sushovan : I feel better.
Suchitra : Today's newspaper, Jita?
Jita : Lying outside.
Sushovan : Newspaper?
Jita : Will you have a look?
Sushovan : I haven't seen a newspaper for days.
Jita : Why? You read it only yesterday.
Sushovan : Did I? Oh yes, I read it yesterday ... You see, I remember something and forget something ... Yes, yesterday I read the paper.
Jita : Read the paper in this room, we ...
Sushovan : No, rather let me go to the other room.
(exits)
Jita : He has improved to a great extent, hasn't he?
Suchitra : Yes.
Jita : He will recover completely after a few days.
Suchitra : I hope so.
Jita : Do you know what he asked me last afternoon?
Suchitra : What?
Jita : He asked : who are you?
Suchitra : Or is it : how am I related to you?
Jita : Yes.
Suchitra : And what's your name?
Jita : Yes, he also asked—'What's your name?'
Suchitra : He also asked me the same question.
Jita : What did you reply?
Suchitra : What was there to reply? I told him your name and my name?
Jita : Do you know what else he asked me?
Suchitra : What?
Jita : Like a normal man he asked me, what had happened to you.
Suchitra : To me?
Jita : He asked : why do you often look at the sea through the window?
Suchitra : What did you say?
Jita : I told him.
Suchitra : Told him of your brother?
Jita : Yes.

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Suchitra : You ... your brother ...
Jita : You loved him very much, my sweet sister.
Suchitra : Jita!
Jita : He tortured you ...
Suchitra : Jita ...
Jita : Some sort of cruelty is there in the blood of this family.
Suchitra : Why have you opened this?
Jita : Tell me, did you like everything of my brother? (after a moment's silence) ... why don't you speak?

SCENE V

(Flashback begins. Suchitra remembers the past. There will be a little echo in the dialogue. Jita's voice "what do you think, dear"? will be superimposed without echo. Audience will know that Suchitra remembers this small scene with Abhijit)

Suchitra : See, one should not have so much of attachment for anything.
Abhijit : (Laughing at her) For anything? You should have the courage to tell me straight, "You shouldn't have so much weakness for women."
Suchitra : Yes, I tell you straight—You should not have so much weakness for women. You are married and a married man must know what is right and what is wrong on his part.
Abhijit : That's enough ... I know it pretty well. You needn't offer me the advice any more. You should also know that I am a representative of a large business concern. Very often I have to be on the move: here and there, far from home, away from you. I also have my ...

(Flashback scene ends, Suchitra is crying ...)

SCENE VI

Scene : Same as Sc. IV
This, in fact, is the continuation of Sc. IV.

Jita : My dear sister-in-law!

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Suchitra : (Trying to compose herself) Why all this today, Jita?
Jita : I am sorry, dear.
Suchitra : (Sighing) There is no end to one's agony. One does not know where it begins and where it ends ... for the lucky, sorrow ends. But for the hapless like me, for whom everything is over ...
where is the end of agony?
Jita : I can't contradict you, dear, with my limited reasoning. Still one can lighten her burden, her sorrow ... won't you admit it?
Suchitra : But what can I do to lighten this agony?
Jita : Shall I ask you one thing?
Suchitra : What?
Jita : If we can trace out the man responsible for brother's death ...
Suchitra : (With a rough tone) If he can be traced out ... I myself ... in my own hands ...
Jita : In your own hands ... can you do it?
Suchitra : I can ... like that ... in the same manner I can ... one who has taken his life ...
Jita : Revenge!
Suchitra : What else can I do to the man who has brought me to this pass?
Jita : Will your pain lessen thereby?
Suchitra : At least to a certain extent ... I won't go on thinking throughout my life that I could not do anything for him. I shall get some peace with this consolation that I have avenged his murder.
Jita : That is why I tell you—one's sorrow can often be lightened.
Suchitra : But who can find out the man? No one saw him, no one knew it ... at an unknown place he was wounded and ...
Jita : I don't know to what extent you rely on father ... But I believe he will never fail in his mission.
Suchitra : To dream is one thing, but to transform it to reality is quite another.
Jita : Wait and see if the dream is turned real ... I told you ... there is a streak of cruelty in our family ... and do you know what is the basis of the cruelty?
Suchitra : What is it?
Jita : The very basis is determination. Wait till father returns from Vizag. You can see for yourself whether I am right

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... Oh gosh! you have not taken your tea yet?

Suchitra : You too haven't.

Jita : Sit here I shall prepare fresh tea for you.

Suchitra : No, no why should you? Rather you relax and let me prepare tea.

(Exits)

SCENE VII

(Suchitra's bed room. Suchitra alone, asleep. Time: Late night. The room is dimly lighted with only the bed switch on. Sushovan enters the room, goes to Suchitra, speaks into her ears)

Sushovan : (In a low voice) Do you hear me?

Suchitra : (Getting up) who?

Sushovan : I ... I ...

Suchitra : You here? At this hour?

Sushovan : You have locked the front door ...

Suchitra : If we don't do it, you will go away in the night. Who will search for you?

Sushovan : No ... I wouldn't have gone. I would have returned after spending sometime at the seashore.

Suchitra : (Loudly) Jita ...

Sushovan : No, don't call her please. I shall sit here for a while. Don't switch on the other light ... I feel better here, in the semi-darkness of the bedlight I shall sit here, in your room, for sometime.

Suchitra : (Fearfully) But ...

Sushovan : I have something to tell you.

Suchitra : To me? ... What?

Sushovan : I have heard that you are going.

Suchitra : Yes, I shall go after father returns from Vizag.

Sushovan : You don't feel well here?

Suchitra : Me?

Sushovan : But I feel nice. Sometimes I remember the past.

Suchitra : But we don't know who you are ... What is you identity?

Sushovan : Shall I tell you? Shall I tell you who I am? My identity ... I ... I ... no, everything gets dark ... I forget everything ... O, how painful is it—between this remembering and forgetting.

Suchitra : Go to your own room ... you will feel better if you sleep for sometime.

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Sushovan : But why have you kept the door of your room open?
Suchitra : Before going to bed I ...
Sushovan : You were thinking?
Suchitra : Yes.
Sushovan : Standing at the window ... like that ...
Suchitra : Yes.
Sushovan : (As if he has got the thread) Like, me you are also ...
Suchitra : I fell asleep .. forgot to close the door ...
Sushovan : I was laying on bed and thinking ... suddenly it came to me ...
Suchitra : What?
Sushovan : To ask you.
Suchitra : What?
Sushovan : I have asked already : You are going?
Suchitra : Yes.
Sushovan : What shall I do?
Suchitra : You?
Sushovan : Who will be there always at my side? ... . (thinking incoherently) who will ask me ... When do you need tea? ... Read the newspaper ... Shall I switch on the radio? ... No, you can't go out ... Jita ... Is she Jita? ... Jita, have you given him medicine? ... (breaking down) Oh; What shall I do?
Suchitra : What are you talking?
Sushovan : A small bungalow on the seashore ... I remember ... a small one ... a beautiful library ... children of the neighbourhood ... hanging creepers on the balcony ... Ivy plants on the parapet ... on the lichi branches nests of small birds ... and ... and ...
Suchitra : Yes, try to remember ... who else were there ... What are their names? ... Which town? ...
Sushovan : I thought for quite sometime before going to bed ... nothing else came to my mind ... head reeled ... like wreaths of smoke, all my consciousness, all my being went upwards ... to a place where everything is still, everything is calm ... everything has converged on a single point ... that point has spread all over life ... there ... there I saw ...
Suchitra : What did you see?
Sushovan : A small nest beneath the ivy creepers ... a bird from outside flew in ... the bird inside noticed it and ... no, no ... I can't tell ... I don't remember any more.
Suchitra : Stop there if you don't remember.

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Sushovan : Give me a little water, please. (Suchitra gives him a glass of water, he drinks it) Ah; I remember ... that question ...

Suchitra : What question?

Sushovan : If I don't get the answer, I can't sleep ... I shall be tortured in intense agony ...

Suchitra : What is the question? How can I answer, if you don't ask me?

Sushovan : Are we and we alone responsible for all our activities?

Suchitra : What action? ... What have you done?

Sushovan : Are we alone responsible for whatever we do? ... Others have nothing to do with it? Are we not influenced by others? ... If we are led by others, attracted by others to do a particular act, why should we alone be held responsible for it? Why should we be held guilty? Why should we be judged in the scale of others? ... Why don't you reply? Where shall one get justice? Can he get the answer at a place where life and death mingle on a single point? Can he hope to get it at the distant horizon where the sea and the sky meet? (suffering from intense pain) open the gate, please ... let me go to the seashore ... I shall seek the answer there. There shall I ... all my sins and all my crime ... leave me, leave me ... (Suchitra holds him) no, don't prevent me by force ... leave me ...

Suchitra : (Loudly) Jita, Jita.

Jita : (enters) What's the matter, sister?

Suchitra : The same attempt ... again ...

Jita : Suicide?

Suchitra : What else? No, I can't take him to the other room forcibly ... Go there, please ... close the door, Jita.

Sushovan : No, no, I won't go. I shall sit here. I feel better.

Suchitra : (irritated) If you feel better, sit silently.

Jita : Sit there. Lean against the pillow and be comfortable.

Sushovan : (as if in a dream) A beautiful house on the seashore ... ivy creepers on the balcony ... a small nest beneath the creepers ... a little bird in the nest ... in that small nest ... ah ...

Suchitra : Jita ...

Jita : Sister ...

Suchitra : (in a low voice) From his subconscious mind ...

Sushovan : Ah! Don't talk please ... Let me sleep a little ... How beautiful is the earth ... as if everything is soft, beautiful .. you are there beside me ... how peaceful ...

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Jita : (in a indistinct tone) Eyelids close.
Suchitra : (indistinctly) sleeping ...
Jita : (in a low voice) Shall we take him to the other room?
Suchitra : (also, in a low voice) No ... here ...
Jita : (in a low voice) He is asleep, dear.
Suchitra : Yes.
Jita : What did you say ... subconscious mind?
Suchitra : Poor fellow ... probably he considers himself responsible for ...
Jita : How could you know?
Suchitra : Sea ... ivy creeper ... nest ... I think his inner self is tortured ... he is suffering from some intense agony ... and to bring an end to his sufferings, he tries to run to the seashore ...
Jita : So, my dear sister-in-law, you yourself ...
Suchitra : What?
Jita : You remain looking at the sea ...
Suchitra : Don't I have any suffering? Have I come to the state of forgetting everything?
Sushovan : (half-conscious, as if in a dream) No ... no ...
Jita : What happened?
Suchitra : He is tortured even in sleep ... conflict ... poor fellow.
Jita : Let us go to the other room.
Suchitra : Come softly ... Let him sleep here ...

(Both of them exit)

SCENE VIII

(Drawing room, Time : Morning, Rudranarayan sitting alone)

Rudra : (Loudly) Suchitra, my daughter ...
Suchitra : (From a distance) coming, father (she enters)
Rudra : Where is Jita?
Suchitra : (Coming nearer) She has gone out. (Coming still closer) what do you need, father?
Rudra : Sit down (a brief silence) Do you guess why I called you?
Suchitra : I don't guess anything.
Rudra : After the tragic death of Abhijit ... I thought ... staying at some lonely place would bring about some change to your mind ... at least you would feel ... That is why I made all arrangements for your stay at Puri.

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Suchitra : Why that topic again, father?
Rudra : Don't I feel your anguish every moment? How you remain indifferent ... how you remain looking at the sea ...
Suchitra : Father!
Rudra : My sorrow is no less, dear ... the difference is I don't express it, I won't do it. Till the very end. What will you do if I break down ... (a brief silence) Do you know why I went to Vizag?
Suchitra : No.
Rudra : The Police know what they are doing. I went to carry on my own investigations ... to know who is responsible for this?
Suchitra : Did you get any clue?
Rudra : A lot of information with which the real incident can be ... (a brief silence) Do you know what I doubt?
Suchitra : What?
(*Someone comes and stands behind the screen*)
Rudra : Who? Who is there on the other side of the screen?
Suchitra : (Looking to the other side) what happened to you? You have come up to here ...
Sushovan : (entering) Oh, I have come to this room.
Suchitra : Yes, you are here.
Sushovan : So ...
Rudra : What? (harshly) What do you want to say?
Suchitra : (as if trying to introduce) Father ... Father there ...
Sushovan : Namaskar ...
Rudra : Suchitra ...
Suchitra : I'll leave him in the other room, father.
Rudra : (rudely) No. (to Sushovan) Go to the other room.
Sushovan : (in a defiant tone) No. I won't go ... I feel better ... I remember everything ...
Rudra : What do you remember?
Sushovan : A small house on the seashore ... open balcony ... surrounded by ivy creepers ...
Rudra : Where was your home?
Sushovan : (trying to recollect) on the seashore ... hillocks on one side ... deep sea on the other ... and between the hills and the sea ...
Rudra : Vizag?
Sushovan : Vizag ... Yes, Vizag ...
Rudra : (Shouts) Suchitra ....
Suchitra : Father!

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Rudra : My guess is not incorrect.
Suchitra : What do you guess?
Sushovan : I feel better ... Here I ...
Rudra : (shouts) No.
Sushovan : Why do you shout?
Rudra : What do you say ... why I shout?
Suchitra : Why do you leave me in such a conflict?
Rudra : What do you say? I leave you ... I?
Suchitra : I was not willing ... but you wanted me to bring him here ...
Rudra : Oh ... I had told ... but ... but ...
Suchitra : Let him sit here, father ... if he feels better, let him sit here.
Rudra : Okay ... but you should come to the other room ... come ... (exits, expects Suchitra to follow him).
Sushovan : Go ... he has called you ... I ... I ... let me sit here ...
Suchitra : Let me switch on the radio ... listen ... (switches the radio on) I ...
Rudra : (from a distance) Suchitra ...
Suchitra : Coming, father. (exits)

SCENE IX

(The same room. An hour later, Sushovan is sitting alone. Radio is switched off).

Sushovan : You ... you again ...
Suchitra : (coming) The radio ....
Sushovan : After sometime I switched it off. Boring, yes, in the meantime I have read something ... so many books in the this room ... I did not like the books either ... Trash! (Silence) ... Not even newspaper .... why don't you tell anything? What happened? What did I do? ... No, no, I have done nothing ... what will you ask me? Ah ... why don't you say anything? You can ask anything you like ...
Suchitra : You were staying in Vizag?
Sushovan : Vizag ... Vizag ... yes. Vizag (suddenly) No, no ...
Suchitra : You don't actually remember or you act?
Sushovan : I don't remember. Why should I act?
Yes ... I remember ... Vizag.
Suchitra : You were staying in Vizag?
Sushovan : Yes.
Suchitra : That small house of yours ...

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Sushovan : Yes, I remember ... That house ... the balcony ...
Suchitra : Surrounded by ivy creepers ...
Sushovan : A little bird's nest among the creepers ...
Suchitra : Suddenly one day a bird from outside entered the nest ...
Sushovan : Horrible ... horrible ... ah ...
Suchitra : Try to remember ... try ...
Sushovan : What?
Suchitra : A little bird in the nest ...
Sushovan : Yes ... it was sitting ... leaning its head outside ...
Suchitra : Your wife?
Sushovan : My wife? Yes, yes ... how could you know?
Suchitra : What happened to that little bird?
Sushovan : That bird from outside came and ...
Suchitra : You had gone out ...
Sushovan : How could you know it?
Suchitra : Tell me, please, what happened?
Sushovan : No ... I don't remember ...
Suchitra : Try to recollect ... that house ... the balcony ... your wife ... and that big bird from outside ...
Sushovan : I have ... I have ...
Suchitra : Killed him!
Sushovan : I am asking you, how do you know?
Suchitra : Why did you kill him?
Sushovan : I ... I can't tell you what I did and why ... er .. why do you look at me like that? How is it that you can't understand me? ... What else should I have done? ... (perturbed) what else should I have done?
Suchitra : (in a choked voice) Why? Why did you ...?
Sushovan : Yes, I remember. Sipra was crying when I returned from office that day, Sipra ... Sipra, my wife. A few days before I had brought him ... him home and introduced him to Sipra. No, I don't remember his name ... Suddenly I developed a sort of hatred towards him ... No, I don't remember any more ... Yes, what was I telling? ... Sipra was crying when I returned from office. She told me, "He is not a good man. Don't give him scope to come here" ... I gave him scope? ... Taking the opportunity of that formal introduction, he visited my home many times ...
Suchitra : (sadly) Aggressive ... too much aggressive ...
Sushovan : Yes, too much ... devil!
Suchitra : (in intense agony) Oh! ...

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Sushovan : That day ... For the last time when I returned from office ... I found oh, no ... ah!
Suchitra : What did you find?
Sushovan : The ivy creepers surrounding the balcony ... the small nest of the little bird ...
Suchitra : What happened?
Sushovan : Creepers were torn apart ... as if they were upswept in a storm ... and that nest was broken ... the little bird was lying dead on the floor ... its neck twisted, wounded ... lifeless ... dead ...
Suchitra : Sipra ...
Sushovan : Her thin lips ... foamy—slushy red, in patches ... suddenly my mind became empty. How dark it was! Sipra, Sipra ... I called her ... turned her body ... but where was she to reply? ... a piece of paper came out from among the folds of her sari ...
Suchitra : Letter?
Sushovan : Yes, a letter ... only a few lines ...
Suchitra : What?
Sushovan : I don't remember ... nothing of it ...
Suchitra : Try to recollect ... what did she write?
Sushovan : What else could she have written?
Suchitra : Tell me; what did she write?
Sushovan : "You could not save me from a beast ... I don't have the face to stand before you ... It's better rather ..." Oh!...
Suchitra : Poor Sipra! I feel for her.
Sushovan : Only for Sipra! Not for me? Don't you pity me?
Suchitra : For you also.
Sushovan : So I have done the right thing. I have committed no crime ... I told you the other day ... to you or someone else? ...
Suchitra : What did you tell?
Sushovan : Are we responsible for all our deeds? Why don't you speak, I have no fault ... I have committed no crime ... I am not responsible for all that I did ... Believe me, I could not realise it then ... I could not make up my mind ... I ran to that devil ...
Suchitra : Where did you meet him? What did you do?
Sushovan : Where did I meet him? Yes ... at a lonely place, a little away from the dock ... he had parked his car there and ... No, I am not a criminal ... Don't look at me like that ... I don't know what I did then ... Tell me, what else

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could I have done? ... What would you have done? ... What could others have done in the circumstances?
(Rudranarayan pushes the door and enters)

Suchitra : Father ...
Sushovan : You?
Rudra : Stop this play-acting.
Suchitra : Father!
Sushovan : I ... I have done nothing ... Don't blame me ... Ah ... It's painful ... open the front door, please ... I shall go to the seashore ... I shall search for Sipra in the waves of the sea ... I shall ask her ... Are we responsible for all our acts? ... (Suchitra holds him) ... No, don't hold me ... leave me ...
Rudra : Leave him, my daughter ... leave that scoundrel.
Sushovan : Yes ... I am a scoundrel ... I am a murderer ... I ... I ... (struggles) ... leave me for a moment ... let me think what happened next ... I shall tell you everything ... I shall remember everything ... leave me to sit alone in the next room ...

(exits)

Rudra : Go ... go ... let me sit in silence in the drawing room ...

SCENE X

(*Time : Evening, Suchitra's bed room. The same day*)

Jita : (Coming) Bhauja ... Bhauja ...
Suchitra : Yes ...
Jita : What has happened?
Suchitra : What?
Jita : You are sitting here silently ... There in that room he is lying on the bed and crying.
Suchitra : Oh!
Jita : There in the drawing room, father ...
Suchitra : What did father say?
Jita : The tea has gone cold ... Twice have I reminded ... He is unmoved ...
Suchitra : Father ...
Jita : I am afraid, sister ...
Suchitra : Jita!
Jita : This sort of silence on the part of father indicates that something is going to happen.

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Suchitra : What will happen?
Jita : There is something in the blood of our family ... This sort of long silence of father ... Something is there in his mind ... Once he makes up his mind ...
Suchitra : (Anxiously) What?
Jita : What did he tell you?
Suchitra : About what?
Jita : How can I know about what? ... I am asking you.
Suchitra : Nothing ...
Jita : So, ... here he is ... Father is coming ...
Rudra : (in an unnatural tone) Jita ...
Jita : Father ...
Rudra : Will you please go to the other room, darling?
Jita : (perplexed) Father ...
Rudra : (rudely) I tell you ... Go to the other room.
Jita : (guiltily) Going, father. (exits)
Rudra : Listen ... close the door from inside.
Suchitra : Father ...
Rudra : Then I shall have to close the door.
Suchitra : Doing it, father. (Closes the door)
Rudra : Sit ... My doubt is not baseless.
Suchitra : I don't understand anything.
Rudra : What's there in it? ... He is the man.
Suchitra : Father!
Rudra : The same place .. the same time ... where is the room for doubt? I got the information in Vizag ... at a little distance from the dock Abhijit was standing ... probably he was relaxing there after a day's work ... a fisherman in his boat was fishing in the sea ... He himself told me this ... He has also told the police the same story ... He saw it from a distance ... another man came to Abhijit ... stood beside him .. for sometime both of them had some conversation. Then he saw both of them were quarrelling ... they had some sort of a hitch. The other man caught hold of a stick and hit Abhijit with that. Abhijit fell down. And the other man ran away. A little later when the fisherman came to the shore he found that everything was over. Abhijit's head, nose, mouth ... everything was stained with blood. He was first to run to the police station and lodge a report with the police ... what do you think?
Suchitra : Eh! ... No, I can't think.
Rudra : Can't think? But I have thought quite a lot after my

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return from Vizag ... I have thought throughout the day ... I have decided what to do.

Suchitra : (fearfully) What?

Rudra : Surprising! Can't you guess what is to be done?

Suchitra : (Perplexed) What?

Rudra : I shall never leave the man who has brought this tragedy to me. First I thought, I would hand him over to the police ... then I thought how would I gain by that? ... Where is the guarantee that he would be punished? ... It may so happen ... he may escape due to some technical flaw in the case. It would be rather better ... Why do you shiver? No, no, nothing would happen to us. Everyone knows, the man has a tendency to commit suicide ... He always runs to the seashore ... He is under our strict vigilance ... Don't they know it? What do you say?

Suchitra : They know it.

Rudra : So what are you afraid of? I shall come exactly at three in the night ... You and I shall take him to the seashore ...

Suchitra : I ...

Rudra : He won't shout if you are there. I have noticed he has some sort of ... ... towards you. We shall drown him in water for sometime ... everything will be over then ... Then both of us will drag him ... his body will lay half in water and half on sand ... there, where the last wave touches the shore. We shall lay him there ... Then where is our problem? ... In the morning we'll say that the man opened the door and came out. Postmortem report will say, he has died of drowning. Police will report that he had a suicide complex ... Neighbours will testify to it ... Ah! ... peace ! ...

Suchitra : Father!

Rudra : I am also perplexed ... No, there is nothing to worry about. Once a decision is taken, we have to remain determined ... as if nothing has happened. Yes ... except we two no one else need to know it ... I don't want Jita to know it. So young ... she should not be entangled with all this. Initially I had the idea that you should keep yourself away from this ... I would do everything myself ... Later I felt, you too have to settle a score ... At least you wouldn't be tortured all your life ... You would get some relief that you have taken revenge ... You would feel that you have done the right thing ... you have done

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your duty ... and duty is always right ... No, let me maintain the balance ... Let me get up ... At three O'clock in the night ...

(Exits)

SCENE XI

(*The same room. After some time*)

Jita : What was the matter, dear? Was it so secret that sending me away, you and father ...

Suchitra : Nothing that important ... Father had gone to Vizag ... He was telling about Vizag ...

Jita : Could he get any information? Any clue?

Suchitra : No.

Jita : Why then you and father ... for so long ...

Suchitra : Don't you know him? He talks all sorts of things.

Jita : He had been brooding over something throughout the day.

Suchitra : Yes, he was talking about it.

Jita : What?

Suchitra : Nothing important. Well, I want to ask you something. Will you answer?

Jita : What's it?

Suchitra : What is right and what is wrong for a man?

Jita : Right is right ... wrong is wrong.

Suchitra : By whose judgement? By which scale? Something may be right for you ... but will it always be right for me? Something wrong for you may not always be wrong for me.

Jita : I don't know where are you leading me to.

Suchitra : Human soul ... subtle feeling of his heart ... Something which he alone realises ... his feeling may get distorted by others' influence ... and when, wearing the actor's mask, we spread his distorted helplessness ... are we right then, Jita? No, perhaps no. Man's free consciousness. When it is released from the influence of others and begins its quest for freedom ... is it wrong, Jita? Haven't you ever tried to discover yourself? And your selfconsciousness ... what is its shape? How does it direct you? What is its signal? Only I ... no one else but I ...

Jita : What has happened to you, dear? What are you telling?

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Why do you torture yourself like that?

Suchitra : Do you feel Jita, I am suffering? Yes, I suffer the pain ... the conflict within ... Jita ....

Jita : After brother has left ...

Suchitra : After? There was no suffering before? Everything was right then?

Jita : There was suffering ... before his death ... and after ...

Suchitra : Where is an end to it?

Jita : Sister!

Suchitra : (as if in a trance) Before and after ... There was one sort of suffering before ... now it's of a different sort. The same pain ... the same anguish.

Jita : I shall stay beside you, dear. Be calm. Time is a great healer.

Suchitra : Which time? ... What is right? ... Who is right? No Jita, I can think no further, will you keep one request?

Jita : What?

Suchitra : Let's go and move about a bit.

Jita : Outside?

Suchitra : Like that morning ... we'll go and sit on the shore ... You and me ... We'll sit on the mound and watch the sea ... how many waves are there ... how much storm ... and memories ... the relief of forgetting. Won't you go? Father is asleep ... Sushovan has probably ...

Jita : Fallen asleep.

Suchitra : Let's go. We'll return only after a little while.

Jita : If you'll feel better, I won't say no. Come.

(They go)

SCENE XII

(The bedroom of Sushovan. He is asleep. Room is semidark. Night. Wall clock tells twelve)

Suchitra : (Whispering) Do you hear me?

Sushovan : Who?

Suchitra : I ... I ...

Sushovan : You? (Getting up from sleep) You? What's the time? Oh ... at this hour ... you ...

Suchitra : Talk slowly ... Father is sleeping in the next room ... Jita in the other room ...

Sushovan : But you ... at this hour ...

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Suchitra : You woke me up the other day ... today I wake you ...
Sushovan : But why? What happened?
Suchitra : I shall tell you something ...
Sushovan : What?
Suchitra : Give me word ... will you keep my request?
Sushovan : About what?
Suchitra : Leave this place ...
Sushovan : Suchitra ...
Suchitra : (a brief silence) I request you ... leave this place ... Why don't you speak? (in a soft voice) why are you silent? Go ... leave this place ...
Sushovan : No.
Suchitra : No arguments, please.
Sushovan : No.
Suchitra : Don't be obstinate.
Sushovan : (thinks) I shall go ... Who else then ...
Suchitra : (anxiously) What?
Sushovan : This attachment ... trying to understand ... the feeling.
Suchitra : Do you feel ... I have tried to understand you?
Sushovan : (with childlike innocence) I feel ... everything is upset in me ... Things are getting into shape for me ... After I told you of my crime ... everything is clear ... dark clouds have vanished from the sky. I remember the things ... I feel better ...My fear and my apprehension have been lost in you. I feel I have lost my identity in your consciousness. The ivy creepers are once again ...
(Suchitra starts crying)
The little nest among the creepers ... the soul of the little bird inside ...
Suchitra : (Crying) No, Sushovan, no ...
Sushovan : Then there is no answer to my question?
Suchitra : (in a tearful tone) Question?
Sushovan : The same question ... Are we responsible for all our actions? ... Are our soul, our consciousness controlled by others?
Suchitra : I ... I ...
Sushovan : So there ... there in the distant horizon where the sea and the sky mingle ... where there is approval of the consciousness ... there ... with that hope .. we'll to that point of the great union ... why don't you speak? ... Why don't you tell you won't go there? Why don't you tell me ... you ... I ...

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Suchitra : (tearfully) Hope ... judgement ... The sensation of one getting lost in another's consciousness ... no ... I can think no further ... I am puzzled ... The storm ... storm over the waves of the sea ... O God ... (helplessly) God ...

Sushovan : Suchitra!

Suchitra : What is right and what is wrong ... Things are getting darker in the whirlwind ... They become hazy ...

Sushovan : Come, Suchitra, come close ...

Suchitra : (in an appealing tone) No ... no ...

Sushovan : Suchitra ...

Suchitra : Don't ask me any more .. Don't tell me ... I can't think ... (She cries and Sushovan consoles her)

Sushovan : Suchitra ... Suchitra ...

SCENE XIII

(Varandah. The wall clock strikes three times. Rudranarayan knocks at the door of Jita's room)

Rudra : (*Worried*) Jita ... Jita ...

Jita : What is it, father?

Rudra : Where is Suchitra? Where is Sushovan?

Jita : Father!

Rudra : Who opened the front door?

Jita : The key was with Bhauja.

Rudra : Come with me, dear .. Be quick.

Jita : Coming, father.

Rudra : No, not here. Let's go out ... May be, somewhere ...

(Both of them go out)

SCENE XIV

(Seashore. Background music indicates sound of the waves. Rudranarayan and Jita with torch in hand. They are led by Lily)

Jita

Rudra : Father, do you see the footprints?

Jita : Yes ... two persons ...

: (From a distance) No more visible ... Here they ... into the sea ...

Rudra (The dog barks)

: Why does Lily bark there?

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Jita : The same footprints come out of the sea ... Lily smells them and barks ... (She moves)

Rudra : Wait, I am coming ... I am coming!

Jita : Foot prints ... of the two in water, again, father.

Rudra : No, Lily runs ahead ... perhaps has seen the prints somewhere ... again ...

Jita : Come quick, father ... quick.

Rudra : You saw! Have you seen again ...?

Jita : Yes ... (the dog barks) but ... again in water ... (runs, exhausted) Lost somewhere ... seen again ... (tired) I can't distinguish, father ... no ... I can't run ... I can't follow Lily .. ah ...

Rudra : (exhausted) No more ... I also can't run any farther ... (tired) can't ...

(*Finally, all sounds lose in silence to the mighty roar of the sea in an eternal quest*).

□

Glossary

Bhauja : Sister-in-law, wife of an elder brother; also affectionately addressed as "sister."

Daughter : Jita is Rudranarayan's daughter; Rudranarayan sometimes addresses Suchitra, his daughter-in-law as "daughter."

Father : Rudranarayan is Jita's father, Suchitra addresses her father-in-law as "father."

Parantha : A kind of delicacy made of wheat flour and fried with ghee.

Translated from Oriya by Arun Kumar Mohanty

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THEN AND NOW

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh

MY first poem appeared in a children's magazine *Balak* while I was in middle school. The momentous event however went unnoticed in the town of Surendranagar as no one had the time to take note of it. I consoled myself that evening watching pigeons flying over and perching on the massive water-tank of the *chowk* of the town. There are memories of my eldest brother painting on glass but virtually no recollection of where a poem was born or reared. It would be little wonder if those prolonged recitations of the Quran and Qasidahs of my childhood had left their rhythmic imprints on the growing mind. The seeds of that sensibility were nourished by the arrival of guru-poet Labhshanker Rawal in Surendranagar. He wrote under the pseudonym of 'Shayar' (poet) and I chose the pen-name 'Malay.' Our mutual association produced songs, ghazals, garba, even sonnets. Also scribbled short stories. With an eye on the special numbers of journals we prepared suitably garnished items. Together we began a hand-written weekly—then fortnightly journal of eight pages called *Pragati* to be placed in the local Birdwood library, a project we continued for two years. On thick handmade paper, the size of an office file I would paint titles in black ink and a cover-picture and picture story in colour. Labhshanker would pen a poem, a story, a thought of the week etc. We had also devised a regular routine in writing poetry which we followed for years. For that we would be on the look out for a quiet, lonely place every Sunday. First it was the embankment of the water reservoir, then in the personal room of the principal of NTM High School, if Labhshanker had managed the key. Later when he moved residence to nearby Joravarnagar we would sit under the shade of a babul tree near the station or on the way to Wadhwan, in the large hall of *Gharshala* (a Gandhian-ashram school), engaged for hours in quest

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of song-lines, rhymes and rhyming and word-constructs of magical mien. Everything written was read or recited soon after and Labhshanker would even sing it out sometimes on a harmonium.

During the idle hours of the week I would sit alone, in a double-door room—overlooking the lane of *ghanchiwad* in a cap reluctantly worn—having performed the rituals of namaz etc. at my father's insistence. In the state of semi-solitude I would draw or write, observing the passing show through the double doors or running off to wander around or stand on the bridge on the river Bhogavo to gestate the surroundings if the vacuousness of the small town became overbearingly endless. On the left appeared the clock tower rising just up the road, the hutments of *miyanavad* through the thistled-hedge of *babuls* and on the rear, the wall of the cotton mill and its gigantic ugly chimney. A distant second bridge appeared to descend into the foliage of the graveyard. And far beyond were seen the isolated farms and barren lands over the flanks of the dry, sandy expanse of the Bhogavo stretching right upto the hill of Chotila. None of these images figured in what I wrote or painted (but grew later on account of having been conserved): much of it based on laboured conjurings by an act of will, leaving me with a feeling of deep restlessness in the end.

Something connecting it all flickered distantly but eluded grasp. A small but deeply felt experience of those days is still vivid. Once on returning from the *Gharshala* my bicycle caught in the lashing monsoon winds, stood up at an angle. Its front wheel remained airborne for a few seconds—stunning me with a momentary sensation of my body being sculpted by the force of the wind. Swaths of wind carved out by the volume of the body and the vast expanse of the world around were caught in unison. Suddenly the notion of concrete versus abstract appeared completely hollow.

In the world of the school, literature or art occupied little space, so literary contact could only grow from reading books, journals and newspapers from title to printer's name at the Birdwood library. I read Hindi with great love and the curiosity to unravel an English journal like *Marg* was equally strong despite the difficulties of language. Observing the tormented faces of Souza (reproduced in *Marg*) I remember a strange stirring. Poetry in textbooks barely touched the questing mind. Most of it sounded spiritless or wanting in substance: its language unfamiliar, artificial coming from an alien community of speakers. Caught in the stranglehold of a genteel culture the word (of poetry) seemed to keep a safe distance from the polluting influence of the spoken dialect and laboured cosmetic of metric struc-

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ture made its very form rust away. The rural dialect was attractive but that too shaped by a literary caste-circuit fitted into formula. (Is it not so even today?) I wondered why so little of the diverse cultures of our countless communities surfaced in our poetry. Despite the colourful forms Gujarati assumed in the tongues of communities like the Vania, Vaghri, Bohra, Mer, Miyana etc., it did not produce a single Vaghri poet, and the few who emerged remained out of the caste of poets. Our poetry did not gain substance from the regional or religious traditions, so it remained anaemic. Belatedly the region of Charotar found a home in the poetry of Ravji Patel and Makarand Dave spurred a mystic *alakh chhand,* but how many are they? We placed Sanskrit on a pedestal to enforce a view of purity and ignored Prakrit. What came from the Sanskritic tradition too remained limited to *Pingal,* (system of metric verse) and the quality and quantum of 'Western' streams reaching us was what the English channel gave passage to. Cleansed through the Gandhian sieve and Victorian puritanism, much in the spheres of our life-experience was left out. Although a Gujarati carried his tongue alongside his commerce all over the world he did not find cultures or literatures of these lands worth importing. (How many translate directly from Swahili even today?) Such questions kept churning in my mind when I reached Baroda in fifty five. Exposure to world art, especially the vibrant spirit of the new art then broke open many a sealed enclosure sharpening these questions. A powerful urge to write in an unfettered spirit gripped me. Those five to seven years are marked by a terrible struggle for expression. The printed word continued to tantalise and terrify the spirit like a carefully conserved object in a museum.

In 'Khordun', I had taken the liberty of alternating stanzas in shorter and longer metric steps to counter the song-line format. I then tried *Harigeet* and *Paramparit,* eventually attempted folkloric imagery in stumbling, rolling rhythms in.

This was not easy in painting: the shadows of formidable mentors hovered along the way when I tried to assert my individuality but the spirit of the world of art charged poetry with a force that intoxicated it. There was no anchor, only signs and no ease at all. The restlessness grew sharper and increasingly awkward. The language I knew appeared hopelessly unable to express the perceptions that sprang up outside the senses, making it full of stops and blocks, kicking me to the brink—to abandon writing poetry altogether. The world in front and beyond the eyes, the *maya* of the true and the false appeared in tandem and nothing of the world of experiences fitted the form of words. Any effort at writing was invariably accom-

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panied with dizzy spells, strange reverberating echoes, a feverish body and a mind swelling to burst, making the daylight blaze beyond its capacity and drowning much of the visible world, leaving behind only glimmering spots of red and blue: like making the body course through a hurricane at the juncture of every word.

The frenzied excitement produced a writing both raw and erratic, even formless: however they did give rise to two discoveries. First, I perceived at the root (of the encounter) the presence of a sound personal experience both in the process and product of writing; and second, it was impossible to arrive face to face with the concrete substance of that experience without throwing to the winds the guilt of being in a state of frenzy. Writing within a frenzied circuit however left the object of poetry somewhat unclear: those observing it from the outside must have found it splintered or excessively fluid. What followed in painting was however quiet the opposite. There training in formal articulation was received through education, so even when I painted in frenzy, threw away the brush and picked up a rag full of paint to daub, erase and paint over and over the image of a restless horse (after Husain) harnessed to a carriage or fleeing, the struggle was to build a body of form. Perhaps the rectangular format of the canvas prevented transgressions beyond the formalist fences. Poetry was outside the sphere of training, even without allegiance to a guru or his *gharana* and unlike painting it was not a commodity either, so it grew outside the orbit of a philosophy of form. Its contours kept flowing around and outward, its warp and weft now woven, now entangled gave vent to wholesome pulsations, primal and violent. In construing word-structures under the spell of exalted moments I noticed the seeds of a poem growing out into another and revealing in the process, the power of internal structurality. This led to a belief in the poetry of continuum in relentless struggle instead of a neatly carved out, model of uniqueness. As a result a series of poems strung together were written.

On observing the changing form of the experience while writing, an irrepressible curiosity prompted spying on the transformation from process to product without missing a wink. Planting tangled, atomic sensory centres in the words I tried to unlayer one with the other. Language here played a dual game: it both mesmerised as well as pointed to ways of countering this mesmerisation. It was no surprise to see the mind dropping off at exactly the crucial moment while trafficking between dream and reality but to see itself assume a different form in the process of poetic transformation left me gaping at the very face of wonder. Then the world began to appear in forms

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it assumed through the window of a poem or a painting. Desire to move from birth to birth got linked with writing and painting. The experience left me looking for an autobiographical element in every work of art. I get touched more and deeply by that which is personally felt; objective, simulated texts seem bland in taste.

My life experience prompts that the world, the language and art are by nature plural in essence (Is not the concept of one world a fascist one?) Our *chetna* like our multiarmed-faced deities and demons is polyvalent. That it was reared by common and contrary streams of thought, realized vaguely at that moment, was corroborated later through studies. The proximity of Suresh Joshi exposed me to the work of Rilke, St John Perse, Lorca, Neruda, Paz and other Latin poets and listening to their verses there was a stirring sensation in having found both companions and ancestors. The illusion of a dividing caste-system prevailing between the senses was already shattered by then. To have found an alternative to a form-oriented genre projecting an ideal of uniqueness by the poetry of continuum, amplitude, momentum and inner structure in the work of these poets enlarged my self-confidence. I even saw the roots of Latin and Oriental sensibilities entwined in each other (Years later, visiting the land of Lorca in Andalucia, I found correspondences between the features of the earth and the life-styles of Cordoba and Kathiawad). Leaning toward the anarchist amplitude of a Pound as against the clear linearity of an Auden or the vast, fluid complexity of a *Mahabharata* or a *Kathasaritsagar* as compared to the uniqueness of a *Ramayana* I was drawn further towards Latin and Eastern literatures.

Painting the image of the horse structured in different combinations led to a formula that left me disillusioned with the formalist attitudes—but again inevitably restless. It came as a welcome break to go abroad at this time. There I tried various stylistic devices but none of it satisfied me, instead it sent the wandering mind back homewards. Looking at the miniatures of the Indian section of the Victoria and Albert Museum, a strong desire to know their essence arose. The regional sensibility of the art of the early Renaissance, especially of Siena in Italy touched me deeply with its tender humanity. On returning home, I gathered and combined all the images and modes I had savoured and tested, and of the living and of those found in pictures, traditional and others. In poetry there was a current urge for restraint. What got written was little, but gone over again and again. Using the song-form, *Paramparit*, a bit like Champu—all of it in tandem.

Today we are face to face with a consciousness of the art history

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of the world—ignoring it to bury our ostrich heads in the *paramparas* is futile. After the *paramparas* tasted the fruit of a consciousness constantly in combat with itself since the Industrial Revolution—the artist has been expelled from the unpolluted paradise of experience. And our *chetna,* in the words of Kabir has slipped through the double-edged wheels of the grind-stone of changing times following the onset of colonialism. The creative-philosophic quakes in the Western world have left us trembling, exploding in the process the countless bridges of our *parampara.* We are witness to a tormented sensibility coloured by forces formalist and expressionist, surrealist and existential. We have seen the unceasing game of the real and the abstract and of non-art and anti-art in the open market places. Now we conjure the Western artist perched on the highest peak belching history, looking out for yet untried alternatives. Phenomenology, the dialectical materialism of Marx or oriental mysticism? A philosophy that divided art into stages of evolution now engaged in building new structural peaks.

For me today, the entire consciousness of history, the place of the artist in it all is raw material, for my use. I have greater confidence in the simultaneous polyvalence of *chetna*, emphasized by a growing loss of faith in the insistent ideals of purity and a singularising aesthetic. There is little attraction to style; instead I find stylistic overlap close to my intentions. The feeling is: let me spread out the chequer board of all times and places, let me gather a world found in momentary glimpses or embedded in deep recesses through a passage beginning at home in *Ghanchiwad,* riots in Baroda and in the wanderings round the world, let me instigate the thousand sensory instincts homing around the own-ness of an experience. It is a moment to confront the totally personal and the entire. □

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CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES

C. Gopinathan Pillai

IT is the intense awareness of the ultimate futility of art that enables postmodern artists to use art itself as a means of destroying traditional pretensions. Postmodernist sensibility has evolved out of a sustained reaction to the conventional view of reality. It repudiates the rationalist and humanist tradition, grounded on the assumption of a sharp differentiation between subject and object, mind and body, fantasy and objective reality and high culture and popular culture. It has provided an alternative way of looking at reality.

The mimetic mode adopted in fiction operated on the basis of the ideas of 'closure' and 'grand order' which are enshrined in the concept of teleology. The classical notion of "order" projected 'ending' as the *sine qua non* of a work of literature. But the pre-classical assumptions invalidate this view and recommend the dismantling of hierarchical ways. A sort of anarchic and chaotic flow of imagination operates in the process of artistic creation. Postmodernism emanates from the tendency to revive in art, the pre-classical notion of disorder and disharmony.

In literature, postmodernist impulses have become manifest more in fiction than in other genres. The traditional mode of mimetic realism was found to be inadequate to represent the extraordinary world, replete with horrific and absurd realities. If life is illusory, it is preposterous to attempt to create fiction that gives an illusion of life.

The postmodern fiction is characterized by an intricate patterning that is governed by self-reflexivity, problematization, borderblur, heteroglossia, temporal shifting, intertextuality, fantasy and parody. It revolts against linear time, realism, objectivity, authenticity, genre purity and univocal meaning. There is no stable subject that develops over a period of time. The postmodernist fictional text is multidimensional with

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multiple voices, gaps and indeterminacies and it is a web of 'signifiers' and 'signifieds' which constitute meaning in a chain of signification. Borges, Marquez, Kundera and Italo Calvino, are some of the outstanding practitioners of postmodernism.

Most of the contemporary novels in Malayalam have been written in the realistic mode. Thakazhi and Keshav Dev revelled in depicting the social undercurrents of life in Kerala in the thirties and forties. M.T. Vasudevan Nair, C. Radhakrishanan, Vilasini, and Ponjikkara Rafi resorted to stream-of-consciousness as a narrative technique. Among the modernists O.V. Vijayan and Anand seem to consider novel as a poetic meditation on existence. The sense of alienation and the search for identity in absurd existential situations form the core of their narratives. But they have not used subversive modes of discourse in their novelistic art. Often, the story takes a linear development. Dislocation in time and employment of fantasy might have brought a touch of postmodernism into Vijayan's *Dharmapuranam* (1985). Scatological and erotic imagery, ecological preoccupations and parody constitute Vijayan's narrative strategy in the novel which is often construed as a unique fictional probing into the post-colonial political realities in India.

M. Mukundan has sought to challenge the conventional concept of fiction even in his early works like *Delhi* (1969) and *Haridwaril Manikal Muzhangunnu* (The Bells Toll in Haridwar, 1972). There is the absence of well-made plots in these novels which turn around the philosophical broodings of some alienated characters. They create the impression that the novelist is preparing to give up the formula of traditional novels. But in novels like *Kili Vannu Vilichappol* (When the Bird Came and Called, 1984) and *Daivathinte Vikruthikal* (The Pranks of God, 1989), Mukundan seems to be reverting to the conventional expressive mode. It is in *Adityanum Radhyum Mattu chilarum* (Adithyan, Radha, and Other, 1993) that he has introduced a deviant style and a dislocated discourse. The novel seems to have generated a new sensibility among readers of Malayalam novels. The ingenious narrative strategy, stylistic deviations, layering of meaning, metafictional dimensions, breakdown of grand narratives, dislocation of time, multiple voices and defamiliarization are some of the techniques that Mukundan has employed in the novel, warranting a variety of readings of the fictional text.

Mukundan uses fantasy as an expressive device to take his protagonist, Adithyan, down through the ocean of time to the 17th century. Adithyan cannot ascertain the beginning of his problem-ridden life. It could be in the 20th century or the 17th century. The

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novelist liberates the characters from the shackles of time and with his free-wheeling fancy, takes them beyond temporal and spatial barriers. For example, there is an episode where Adithyan reaches Gwalior to listen to the music of Mia Tansen, the great musician who lived in the 17th century. Among others, he meets Shambu, the potter and his widowed daughter, Dulari. The awareness of the intense grief of his parents over his disappearance disturbs Adithyan. On his way back to the real world he is accompanied by Dulari. Mukundan describes the situation: "Adithyan who is to be born after four hundred years, walks along the dusty road with Dulari." (P. 28)

Mukundan's novel is self-reflexive and the novelist often makes the problematic nature of his undertaking, his subject matter. The reader is invited to participate in the aesthetic and philosophical problems that the writing of fiction presents today. The novel assumes metafictional dimensions as it is read like a text that discusses, analyses and comments on the art of novel-writing. Here is an observation on one of the difficulties encountered by the novelist: "In short, it is impossible to think of Adithyan and Dulari together at the same time, within the limits of our scientific assumptions on time" (P. 28). The penultimate chapter closes with another remark on the creative process: "In the next chapter we will read about the small game to be played by Adithyan beside the dead body of his mother. With that, this short story, replete with irregularities and incongruities of Adithyan, Radha and others, ends." (P. 165). Elsewhere in the novel, the novelist remarks that a writer attempts to give shape to a chaotic universe through his writing.

Like other postmodern novelists Mukundan plays freely with the language in *Adithyan*. Repetition is one of the stylistic devices he uses in this novel. While introducing Romi Fernandez, one of the narrators, Mukundan says: "His father is a bandmaster who retired from the navy." (P. 15). After a dozen lines the same description is offered parenthetically. Similarly, Adithyan tells Radha: "This sunlight arouses in me memories of your abdomen". (P. 18). After a few lines he says: "Your abdomen arouses in me memories of this sunlight" (P. 19). Language is foregrounded and the expectation of the readers is denied fulfilment through clever twists and linguistic manipulations. The eighth chapter ends with the following expression: "Let's come back to Radha's poverty." (P. 71). The next chapter opens with an identical sentence. Mukundan fantasizes that greyness spreads from the heads of Bhaskaran and Leela, who seem to replace Adithyan and Radha, to the beard of Agniveshan. Then he asserts that to know the miseries of his old age we should go forward by a few

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years. The sentence that follows does not square with this idea. He says: "We go backward by a few years" (P. 100)

The multiplicity of narrative voices, an unmistakable sign of post-modernism, is what distinguishes *Adithyan* from other contemporary Malayalam novels. Brihaspathi, Romi Fernandez and Abhimanyu Jalan seem to be performing the duties of a chorus. They are at once narrators and characters. The story unfolds through Adithyan, Radha, Sudha and Sreedharan. The omniscient narrator often fades away, leaving the thread of the story with one of the other narrators. The multiple voices present diverse points of view bringing out a complex narrative strategy. The fictiveness of the novel is sought to be highlighted through the heterogeneity of the voices.

The novel is broken up into microstructures and thus prevented from evolving into a unified, unfragmented piece with an exciting climax and convincing conclusion. But Mukundan attempts to glorify indigenous art-forms and denounce western culture. Radha reacts to the commercialization of her paintings: Adithyan returns from America and donates his entire savings to "earth care", an organization that has undertaken the task of restoring the earth to its pristine state of health and glory. The last chapter in particular focuses on Mukundan's ecological and environmental preoccupations. Adithyan's love of music transcends all his materialistic pursuits. Mukundan launches a systematic campaign against the trivialization of values, the 'Kitschified' ways of life. Adithyan, Radha and the others are governed by the laws of mutability, ageing and decay. But the universe has eternal youth.

Mukundan's creative energy weaves out a technically astounding and highly innovative work of art from the enigma of existence, the diverse allotropes which are the stuff his novels are made of. *Adithyan* represents the logical culmination of his creative efforts, spread over three decades. There are superficial musings on time in *The Bells Toll in Haridwar*. But in *Adithyan*, Mukundan attempts to perceive spatio-temporal concept as a philosophical problem and questions the traditional narrative strategies of Malayalam novel. □

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ISOLATION, INVOLVEMENT AND IDENTITY INDIAN WOMEN AS AUTOBIOGRAPHERS

Moutushi Chakravartee

OF autobiographies by Indian women this paper examines three representing different strands: one is by a woman of pre-Independence days, another by a tribal woman and the last by a poetess writing in English. They present not only a kaleidoscope of the Indian society vis-a-vis women, but also reflect their isolation, involvement and their problem of identity. It is a truism that the male hegemony has bestowed "isolation" on women in the name of protection, safety and security. Ironically, by the same token the Indian woman has been given the status of near divinity as representatives of *shakti* (divine power/force) but without giving her the right to self-determination. The 'glory' of isolation has been thrust on her in order, cleverly, to keep her aloof from the mainstream of social life. She has been considered either the embodiment of divinity or just a commodity, but she has never been allowed the simple status of a human being.

Hypocrisy and paradox co-exist in the Indian socio-religious context of which the woman as a class has been a victim. Autobiographies by Shudha Mazumdar: *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, Sita Rathnamal: *Beyond the Jungle*, and Kamala Das: *My Story* are all expository of a peculiar apartheid perpetrated on women by the Indian men. At the same time these autobiograhies also reveal a sense of involvement that they always felt and the problem of identity they faced. In the process, overtly or through suggestions, they call the bluff of male protection. In other words, women's isolation, in most cases, is a received social role which, willy-nilly, they have to play. Each of the three autobiographies locate unerringly that this role-model is more a matter of convenience for the Indian social set-up than that of genuine protection and safety.

Formal education for women was unthinkable in India until as late as the later part of the nineteenth century. The formal education

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was available to girls born in aristocratic families of metropolitan cities in India. Shudha Mazumdar was one such 'fortunate' girl who received 'English' education at the turn of the century, at St. Teresa's Convent School. This too was possible as her father was a great liberal and was, from the standards prevailing then, a non-conformist in his culinary and sartorial habits. His tastes were moulded after the British fashion. This had a direct and lasting influence on the child Shudha.

Shudha's mother was rather on 'orthodox' Bengali housewife, yet liberal enough not to force her ways or opinions on either her husband or her children. The account given by the author in her *Memoirs* shows a balanced approach when she draws the character of her parents. The author's mother chose the role of a withdrawn lady, it was not thrust upon her by her mother-in-law or anybody else. The narrative clearly brings out the truth that the women have borne the brunt of the burden of carrying on the social convention/tradition. Despite her role inside the house, there was no gulf between her and her husband.

The author's father—Tara Pada Ghose—made no distinction between a son and a daughter. Nobody bothered about the sort of life Tara Pada led not only because he was rich but chiefly because he was a 'male.' Interestingly one notes that there were two sets of kitchens. Her mother's was presided over by her mother and there were professional Brahmin cooks. Her father's kitchen was managed by one Pir Mohammed, an able cook of European dishes. In spite of this, Shudha's mother would be present at the time of her husband's lunch and dinner in accordance with the prevailing custom although she would not sit at the table. One finds 'isolation' by choice so prevalent in the received notion of Indian womanhood.

What Shudha Mazumdar narrates about her taste for chicken cutlet that her father would lure her to when he would sit to eat is revealing. She says that the pleasure was brief for after this 'unclean' food, she had become 'unclean' herself, and she had to have a wash and change every bit of her clothing before she was "permitted to touch anything in Mother's apartment." (p. 11). Moreover, she had to bear her younger brother's uncharitable comments and his unpalatable behaviour. As a little girl it was difficult for her to equate that the same food bore the stigma of 'unclean' whereas her brothers could eat it with relish. Then she was told

> "they were men, and it ill-befitted me, one of the inferior species, to even dream of acting like them."
>
> (p. 11)

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It hardly leaves anyone in doubt how a woman was treated, how she was isolated and was systematically and rigorously kept away from the mainstream. Even her younger brother takes it for granted that she belongs to an inferior species—a result of the "collective consciousness" of the dogma-and-ritual-bond Bengalis. Albeit the *Memoirs* is not very vocal about this 'artificial' division, the location of 'artificiality' is no mean matter. Obviously, she doesn't approve of this segregation of women.

Later in life, as a woman married to a civil servant, she had more opportunities than a common Bengali housewife to come in contact with people (not all of whom were women) of different opinions and tastes. She knew the freedom struggle from close quarters. It gave her a sort of involvement not merely with individuals, influential and otherwise but an involvement with causes and ideas. Such encounters had a salubrious effect on her intellect which made her a noted Indian woman later. Though she is objective in her appraisal of her father, her liberal ideas and catholicity of taste are a result of his influence. She found a few things in her father 'contradictory' :

> As I look back, I find my father was a man much ahead of his time and also full of contradictions. (p. 53)

Now, being ahead of one's time is fraught with 'contradictions'. Tara Pada Ghose was fond of the English way of life and yet would don a *dhoti* during Durga Puja. Such an objective approach speaks of her involvement with woman's emancipation on the one hand, and a lurking motive of finding one's identity. She had already noted a dichotomy in appreciation of male and female positions in both the family and society but her intellect wasn't prepared to accept it as *fait accompli*. Her convent education may have endowed her with an inclination to think independently. Spiritual questions like how many gods are there, whether God can be known palpably, to say the least about them, are teasing questions. But all the same this questioning spirit points to an intellectual involvement in matters ideational. Admittedly, a questioning intellect is the first thing that one must have for an independent—even uncustomary—point of view. Latent in such questions is the search for identity (pp. 55-56). From her elder brother she got answers which were in keeping with the liberal views propounded by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Knowledge may be had through different paths but the easiest one is through faith, faith is one's own self as well as faith in God.

Although it doesn't appear to be of great significance on the

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surface, it points to the author's concern for knowledge based not on custom and prejudice but on intellection. Here is the seed of, what may be termed, individuation, and an Indian woman was supposed not to question but only to accept the received opinions. Individuation, intellection and identity are all interlinked.

Shudha Mazumdar's involvement, later, with *Mahila Samiti* (Women's Society) at various places of her husband's postings brings out her love for women's freedom from the 'courtyard'. That women could have a forum to put forward their views and opinions was no mean achievement in the early years of the present century. She was deeply involved in such feminine movements. The transformation of a girl brought up under strict vigilance of female orthodoxy to a woman associating herself with the International Women's Organization is the story of Shudha Mazumdar going full circle but certainly not arriving at the same point where she began. Latent liberalism in her finds fruition in creating fora for women and bringing them out from the cribbed confines of a sequestered domestic life in order to find a new and true identity for themselves. Her inclinations and involvement were with an open atmosphere of the mind.

From Shudha Mazumdar's account, it becomes clear that in order to establish oneself one need not be loud and vociferous in expressing one's opinions. What is needed is a genuine catholicity of mind. Sincerity of purpose and a sense of conviction were of cardinal importance. The author got help in her efforts by reading books from her father's library. This reading emancipated her ideas. It is easy to write about the emancipation of ideas (specially where women are concerned) in the nineties but even to vouch for such ideas in the twenties was an anathema, and to let some of them be known was sacriligous. Undaunted in her approach, Shudha Mazumdar did not hanker after name and fame. Her *Memoirs* indicates her tentative beginnings, yet in her conviction she shows an indomitable courage. That later in life she represented India in International Labour Organization's conference on Women's Work was only a befitting tribute to her life-long zeal and dedicated work.

Shudha Mazumdar shows the way of how a housewife can open up new vistas of work for the lasting identity for women. But this quest for identity is a constant struggle and the *Memoirs*, although written unaggressively, points to a committed involvement without which any sense of identity becomes meaningless. A woman of her upbringing would perhaps be satisfied with the three principal rites of passage: birth, marriage and death. Not so Shudha Mazumdar. Once the idea of emancipation of women from social shackles took

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root in her, she got involved in the work for the upliftment of their condition. The autobiography is instinct with a quest for identity.

If Shudha Mazumdar was born with a silver spoon in her mouth, Sita Rathnamal was born unsung, and we do not even know the date of her birth as births in her community are recorded and remembered through seasons and phases of the moon and natural occurences which are annual features. Her autobiography: (the only published work) *Beyond the Jungle* rouses the reader to the twin problems of emancipation and identity of a tribal woman. If the events in the *Memoirs of an Indian Woman* are chiefly concerned with an upper middle-class life and habit and an intellectual awareness, *Beyond the Jungle* owes no such pretensions. That life is stranger than fiction is proved beyond doubt in the case of this young author who even died unsung. But a reading of the book clearly indicates the feeling of 'hurt' with which she might have left the world, perhaps because she was a woman and an Irula—a tribe that still worships Rangaswami peak for their deity is Ranga (p. 6). Soaked in the credulity of the tribespeople, she was wholly unaware of time in a world of mutability :

> ... for centuries the Nilgiri mountains of Southern India have remained isolated, like an island amid the storm and change of Indian history; ... (5)

The historical awareness which informs the *Memoirs* of Shudha Mazumdar seems to be wholly absent in the case of Sita Rathnamal, and yet such a child of Nature (almost an Indian Lucy Gray) becomes avidly conscious of class and isolation in the civilised and sophisticated society with which she had to rub shoulders as a result of an unfortunate accident.

As a child she either accompanied her father and mother on their different chores near the stream or into the forest to collect water or to gather fruits. Imbued with the mystery of the forest and in the snug comfort of parental care and warmth, Sita had hardly any knowledge of time in her childhood when things were unalterable and people immortal (7). That a child's universe is one dimensional needs no proof. In his *Autobiographies* Yeats has a similar comment to offer :

> It seems as if time had not yet been created, for all thoughts are concerned with emotion and place without sequence. (5)

Now, sequence and intellection go together of which the writer as a child was blissfully unaware.

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The invocation of irony is Sita Rathnamal's forte. Against the background of 'changelessness' and 'immortality' she gives a description of her mother's death (pp. 8-9). She did not know what had happened, and even the wailing of women, who had gathered there, created only a nebulous impression on her mind. Whatever she records of her childhood among her folk relates to the nearness to the earth, there being hardly any distinction between man and nature. Here is involvement with a difference.

An accident provided her an opportunity to come in contact with the urban life—a life of 'unreality' and sophistication. This accident resulted in a fracture of one of her legs which refused to respond to tribal treatment. Despite the belief among the tribals that Kurumba people were the sorcerers of the forest (14) Sita Rathnamal's condition worsened, and her father had to carry her to Coonoor not very far from the village. The fractured leg was put under plaster, but because of 'unfamiliarity' she could not sleep until she received an injection later in the evening.

What is more, the account of the writer clearly demonstrates a more serious fracture—a fracture of the 'self' that no plaster could heal. Paradoxically, the healing of the fracture of the leg made her realise the fracture that had occurred inside her. On her return from the hospital, she felt the life of the tree and the forest and :

> accepted it as I accepted the hut where I lived; only I no longer thought of these things as the whole of life, as once I had done. (24)

So the age of innocence had already yielded place to that of experience. With the active help of one Dr. Krishna Rajan at the hospital, she learnt a little Tamil and English. Another chance encounter with an army officer, one Major Ganguli—saw her at the threshold of a formal education at a school in Doda. Not only she was a victim of prejudicial treatment, but she was hardly acceptable as a human being. Her very first encounter with Miss DeVaz—the housemistress—made her realise that she was hardly desirable in the school. She was considered 'wild' and such specimens are not welcome in this school. In fact, she found out in her first walk with Miss DeVaz from the station to the school, her 'unwantedness.' She says with poignance that her

> education had already begun: the first thing learnt was the double word: class/caste. Never mentioned; but experienced in thousand different ways. (31)

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This class consciousness is a lasting and sad impression chiefly because it leads to emotional frustration. Lurking behind this realisation is a sense of individuation. Without going into the complexity of the matter the ilk of Miss DeVaz are busy putting notions and things into proper 'boxes' provided by social norms. But very gently and quietly, Sita Rathnamal gives this attitude a mild knock without eschewing matters unpalatable.

Without taking recourse to self-pity, this autobiography emphasizes a loneliness that is chiefly emotional. It is not a mean achievement when we recall Andre Maurois's description of an autobiography as :

> a prolonged speech for the defence.
> (Cassell's *Encyclopaedia of Literature*, Vol. I, p. 63)

It is significant that the author gives evidence of a peculiar boldness while describing her emotional development. The unpleasant experience as a result of her contact with 'civilization' has not been glossed over, nor has it been exaggerated. *Beyond the Jungle* does not adopt an overt socio-historical stance, yet it unveils the societal prejudices that eat into the vitals of Indian polity. And this is because of an innate conflict of received opinions and individual identity problem of a woman. She has a meaningful role to play outside of 'home' as well. The autobiographies of Shudha Mazumdar and Sita Rathnamal are instances in point without ever being too vocal about it.

A woman's identity is not confined to being patterned by father/husband at various points of time in her life. She has an individual identity independent of an 'umbrella' influence. She does not need a crutch as her life-long companion. Sita Rathnamal's relations with Dr. Rajan move on expected lines despite the differences in age and class. On being presented with a gold bangle after having spent a fine day with the doctor, she records :

> This new possession at once became the most precious thing I had. It was something alive, glowing and as rare as thoughts and feelings that prompted the gift. (183)

It hardly needs stressing that an Irula and a Brahmin were in love. Dr. Rajan did not subscribe to conventional notions consciously, and yet he was distressed. If a contact with the mainstream caused an emotional gulf in the author, Dr. Rajan's intimacy with the Irula girl was also a sort of realisation :

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> There is no need for it now, yet the Brahmins still cling to their outmoded ways. So I have become an outcast ... But I fear that one day the terrible dogma that was seared into my brain before I could reason for myself will have its revenge. (178)

Perhaps, it has already begun taking its revenge in the rent personality of Dr. Rajan, a curer of physical diseases, suffering himself from an incurable psychic dichotomy.

Dr. Rajan's maladjustment leads to Sita Rathnamal's disillusionment. Having walked on the 'crooked road of life' (Yeats *Autobiographies,* p. 238), she went back to her native land resigned, but not embittered.

Her account locates light in the darkness of the forest and darkness in the blinding blaze of sophisticated civilization unmistakably. She appears to be content with, what Lawrence calls

> shedding one's emotions in books in order to be master of them.
> (D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Letters,* Penguin, 1950: 5)

Obviously, the 'collective unconscious' is a great hindrance towards social progress and change. Dr. Rajan's confessions to her (pp. 248-250) is indicative of the truth that

> in this ancient land it is not easy to throw away all the ancient teaching; the pointing finger of the past cannot be avoided, it is upon every temple, statue and shrine, by the banks of every sacred river and echoing from our epics. (248)

In fact, the educated, urban man in Dr. Rajan is more 'cribbed and confined' than the Irula woman, who is more courageous and is prepared to come out of isolation and in the convention-ridden values and dogmas that have become redundant in the modern context. Dr. Rajan diagnoses correctly that Sita Rathnamal is "only at the beginning of a life of absolute freedom" (250). Societal norms are both prescriptive and restrictive. The author shows a determination to usher in a change listening to the voice of conscience, but her companion fails to rise to the occasion.

The two lamps that they let go in the stream on the Diwali night symbolically locate the identity of the two persons best :

> Mine escaped to the centre of the stream and moving quickly in the current was carried on and on, until, still burning brightly, it was carried around the farthest bend, where it became lost to sight. Krishna's lamp got caught in an eddy and turned in slow circles round and round in the same spot. (251)

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Not isolation, but a new involvement is clearly hinted at. Moreover, like Tagore's Nandini (*Red Oleanders*), Sita here is bolder than any 'male' to usher in a change and is also prepared to strive for a new identity.

Kamala Das's *My Story* was not written merely to honour her commitment to her publisher when she was fighting for life at her 'first bout with heart disease' (p. v.), but

> because I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience. (v.)

The opening chapter of the book begins with the narration of a 'colour prejudice' so prevalent in the Indian society. The chapter also reveals the social status of the Nairs (Kamala was born a Nair), and the school atmosphere smacked of 'class' distinction, almost a sort of apartheid. Now, such an account from an Indian woman demonstrates the author's emancipated intellect and an unconventional appraisal of the whole matter. Writing, in itself, is an effort at breaking away from isolation. One writes to communicate, to share one's own point of view with the readers, to involve oneself with the large mass of people. The description of a personalised account of Ammalu (the author's grandmother's sister, 17-18) compares favourably with that of Sita Rathnamal's account of her mother's death. Superstitions connected with funeral rites find a place in the autobiography, but with a tacit disapproval.

Neither Sita Rathnamal nor Kamala Das has any lofty ideal of writing history in their autobiographies. Yet some socio-political events/ ideas would normally creep in as they do in Shudha Mazumdar's *Memoirs*. Neither of the two autobiographies discussed above is blantiantly 'frank' about personal and/or man-woman relationship as *My Story*. It appears, at times, that Kamala Das suffers from a sort of obsession. Her marriage, on her own showing, was not a happy one. She was married very young—in her middle teens to be precise. She relates that her 'body' was not prepared for the occasion, but as readers we find that her mind was also wholly unprepared. Thus her memory of the nuptial night is unsavoury of which she makes no bones. Her initiation to the sexual act is viewed as

> the extreme brutality of the attack (p. 89)

She remembers only the feeling of 'hurt' and not the real consummation of marriage :

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> The rape was unsuccessful but he comforted me when I expressed my fear that I was perhaps not equipped for sexual congress. (pp. 89-90)

Such frank statements illustrate the boldness and truthfulness of confessions. Perhaps, they also point to an emancipation from taboos regarding the mention of sex in our society. A study of this autobiography convinces one that inhibitions are 'mind forged manacles' (as Blake put it in a different context) from which the intellect must be freed.

Because of her wholly unconventional stance, and starkly frank narration of her affairs, Kamala Das became the butt of hatred for the rich and the old. It is obvious that the rich and the aged prosper on accepted and received norms. Her advocacy of a new set of morality gained her friends among the young, but not among those who were the perpetrators of immoralities under cover of one sort or another. Even those whom she called 'uncles' since her childhood, as they were her father's friends and acquaintances, did not spare her of their

> lecherous hugs from behind the doors and leered at me while their wives were away. (157)

Such an incisive attack on morality coupled with personal experience heightens the innate quality of identity. She knows that she is different from others of her sex, and with her poetic sensibility, she is capable of unfolding unpleasant truths about herself and those belonging to an older generation.

Non-acceptance of the customary role-model of masochism informs Kamala Das's *My Story*. The first chapter of the book is concerned with colour consciousness and the brutality attendant upon it. Her brother would be teased by white boys. Once by pushing a pencil into his nose he was made to bleed. And

> He was stunned by the cruelty but even the tears seemed inhibited, staying suspended on his lashes while William the bully exclaimed "Blackie, your blood is red." (p. 2)

Without tolerating this ignominy, Kamala scratched William's face in a mad rage. So even as a child, she was not prepared to accept insult. It is not only courage but also non-conformism and active protest. We ought to remember that this happened in the hay day of British rule in India.

Kamala Das rightly makes a self-assessment :

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> A poet's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment. I was emotional and over-sensitive. (p. 157)

Her sensitive intellect is incapable of accepting falsehood very much like that of Shudha Mazumdar's. But where the latter is rather quiet, Kamala Das is almost flagrantly outspoken. One is able to locate verbal emancipation in the case of the poet. Perhaps this is a change that has occurred during the course of three or four decades. Whether or not she is playing to the gallery, already a new non-conformist identity begins to emerge in the attitude and writing of this autobiography. Kamala Das who 'had become a truth addict' (p. 200) made her relatives, who were parasites of the feudal system, fear that

> I would write of their misdeeds ... and of the true immorality (sic.) which takes shelter nowhere else but in the robust arms of our society. (p. 200)

She is defying society and its multiple standards. The systematic persecution of women by society comes in for frontal attack. Not only a woman is not afraid of divulging secrets of her elders, but she is bent upon locating the seamy side of customs and rites that have become insignificant today, as even Dr. Rajan accepts in *Beyond the Jungle.* Clinging to the past may be a safe device of perpetrating ignominies on one section of society, but the awareness of women who have received education cannot be framed by 'dreary sand of dead habit' (Tagore: 'Where the head is'). Incidentally, it may be pointed out that all these three women had got convent education which inculcated in them a sense of freedom in habit and thought and also expression. Each one of these autobiographies, whatever the tone, is a critique of social norms which appear to them as a camouflage for expediency, and mean selfishness. In a way, all these accounts are experiments with truth and honesty in a world infested with falsehood and mean selfishness of diabolic proportions.

None of the three writers is hedged in. On the contrary, their autobiographies point to an involvement that is free from dogma and orthodoxy which have infested Indian womanhood since the middle ages, if not earlier. All these women, whatever their social status—either a middle class Nair woman, a Bengalee upper caste woman or a tribesgirl—have been able to locate the road to freedom. Their accounts prove beyond doubt that they are all simmering with an indomitable courage which has made them cross the threshold of convention-bound social customs. Writing not only to confess but also

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to present their own points of view was, in itself, an act of defiance born out of a new concept of individuation. Parameters of women's role in the socio-political context have undergone a change. One must take advantage of this change and further the process in order to identify their self-respect without let or hindrance. The conventional society of which they are the product will not allow them the luxury of an emancipated identity. So a latent protest, or, at least, a gesture of iconoclasm is locatable in the *Memoirs* and in *Beyond the Jungle*. In *My Story*, it becomes obvious. But even if one notices mere gestures of iconoclasm, the very gesture of iconoclasm, becomes all, a substitute for the iconoclasm itself.

Writing against 'collective persecution', the nature of feminine protest betrays a problem of identity as well. If an autobiography is 'a prolonged speech for the defence' (Andre Maurois, Cassell's *Encyclopaedia of Literature*, p. 63), these Indian women autobiographers try to secure and defend their identity as women; they refuse to be patterned, and play-act in accordance with their two directors—father and husband. Which is explicit in Kamala Das and implicit in Shudha Mazumdar as she could locate contradictions in her father's nature. Emotional involvement of Sita Rathnamal does not take away from her the quality of an objective appraisal even of Dr. Rajan, whom she loves. Objectivity informs Kamala Das's account as well. So she could write devastating truths about herself and some of her elders. It appears from a study of these autobiographies that it is women who are not only preservers and repository of age-old conventions, but should the occasion come, they are the ones who could (and in fact, many of them did) break away from these blind dogmas, in search of a true identity.

We all know that all the above-mentioned women were fortunate to have been introduced to the great liberal influences provided by a study of literature. Lionel Trilling, in a different context, notes

> ... the study of literature has traditionally been felt to have a unique effectiveness in opening the mind and illuminating it, in purging the mind of prejudices and received ideas, in making the mind free and active. (*Encounter*, Vol. XXV No. I, July, 1965, p. 4)

which may easily be applied to our authors here. Convention-oriented gender role is not what they desire. Moving with the times and trying to overcome that feeling of 'hurt', these writers are proponents of an identity not confined to the four walls of a house. They can and do open up unbeaten tracks.

What Kamala Das says applies to each one of these writers :

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> People like us who believe in the essential dignity of human beings are always left isolated. (p. 196)

Yes, this isolation is the result of a new awareness and a new identity which refuse to accept the received role of a woman in the Indian society. This isolation or solitariness is also the gift of modernity as C.G. Jung comments :

> The man whom we can with justice call 'modern' is *solitary*. He is so of necessity and at all times, for every step towards a fuller consciousness removes him further from his original *participation mystique* with the mass of men ...
>
> (*Modern Man in Search of a Soul*; 227)

Shudha Mazumdar, Sita Rathnamal and Kamala Das are individuals with an identity that refuse to be patterned (Cf. D.H. Lawrence, 'Give Her a Pattern': *Selected Essays*).

Autobiographical writing, in the ultimate analysis, is an exercise in self-exposure. But the aperture of light and the angle of vision are controlled by the autobiographer. Hence 'protests' are now convert, now obvious: Sita Rathnamal is a bridge between the covert approach of Shudha Mazumdar and 'frank' and bold exposure of Kamala Das. It is not enough to be born a Bangalee, or an Irula or a Namboodiri. The maturing process through conventional role-model to a new identity is a long journey from the 1930s to the 1980s. Yet the urge to come out in the open is locatable. The writer is always superior to his art. The search for identity and the establishment of a new role, therefore, continue through this cathartic process of writing autobiographies.

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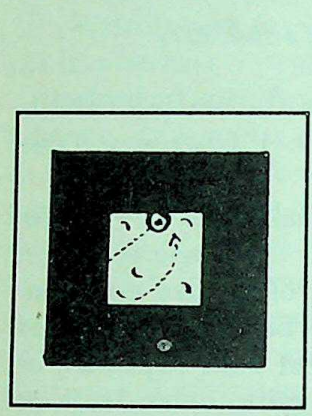
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Kashmiri

ON SOMETHING OR THE OTHER

P.N. Pushp



Kenh Na Ta Kenh (Essays) by Syed Rasool Pompur; Sangam Publishers, Bijbehara, Kashmir; 1991; pp 216; Rs. 60/-

THE *Kenh Na Ta Kenh* (Something Or the Other) of Syed Rasool Pompur (b. 1940) is a collection of nineteen items of Kashmiri prose labelled 'Second Collection of Essays'. Obviously the author does not expect each of these items to be viewed as 'a loose sally of mind' but as a piece of creative prose writing that bears the imprint of his personal experience and compelling utterance. Viewed as such, no doubt, the collection considerably fulfils the promise held out by his earlier collection titled *Yeth Aadamy-vanas Manz (In this Woodland of Adam,* 1986).

Pompur has tried his hand on a number of genres both in prose and verse. His prose covers personal essay, travelogue, reportage, short story, literary research and critical evaluation, while his verse reflects the latest trends in Kashmiri *gazal* as well as *nazam.* Braving paucity of facilities in production and sales promotion he has had to be his own publisher for most of his works (about a dozen in number) except a work or two assigned to him by the Akademi or the Kashmir University.

Pompur's themes; diverse in range and contemporary in implication, include : the urge to write and perspectives on creative writing (pp 12-19, 41-54); intriguing situations and ironies of fate (pp 25-34, 55-62, 91-101, 126-133, 193-203); woman's weal and woe

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(pp 35-44); illusions of aspiration and doles of destiny (pp 73-81); mindsets and attitudes (pp 82-90, 102-108); bungling and high-handedness particularly in the name of socio-political idealism and administrative requirement (pp 109-118, 155-167); and, above all, cross-cultural interaction and interlinguistic exchange (pp 132-154, 168-192); or, a zestful literary convention spoilt by a tantalizingly practical joke played by a mischiefmonger who thieved away the shoes of a distinguished delegate (pp 63-65).

The author's personal touch speaks out even in the titles as, for instance, in 'Why do I write?' (p 12), 'I got Entangled for No Fault of Mine' (p 25), 'Perverse is My Fate' (p 91), 'Would That I am Back There Again' (p 132) or, 'May This My Hope Long Endure' (p 168). Even matter of fact (abstract) themes are, by and large, treated by him as eloquently personalized accounts embodying authentic reflexes and responses except where he sounds like doling out dry bones of derivation as in the case of "Democracy" (p 111) and "Curfew" (p 155) or, where he gets entangled in academic details of historical topography as in the context of "Hyderabad" (pp 141-142).

Waxing eloquent over his themes Pompur often revels in poetic exuberance though, sometimes, he does so irrespective of the demand or scope of his context. We have, however, no reason not to believe him when he says, "The fact is that I continue to be a poet while writing prose too. That is so because *writing writes* (p 19). Hence his recourse to the *mothertongue* which alone, according to him "can hold up a mirror to my culture as well as individual identity."

As to the main genres of his writing he further takes us into confidence, "I write verse; occasionally essay and short story too, according to my creative proclivity at the moment, in tune with my experience or in response to an inner urge. As if the silence of the ocean during the bright fortnight nurses hundreds of tempests in its bosom. The felicitous moments of (creative) writing are unpredictable. Be it night or be it daytime, creative urge comes into operation and pulls you up by the ear out of a crowd and bids you race your horses of fancy and to take a plunge into the depths of your heart and come up with precious pearls. Alphabet appears before you handfolded pleading to be pressed into service as gems fit for rings." (p 18)

Most of Pompur's 'essays' are subjectively structured on objective facts and events. Of particular charm are his reminiscences throbbing with anecdotal verve, here and there, and embedded even within his travelogues these often peep out of a thin lining journalese. Weak links in such a literary endeavour, however, become apparent the

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moment the poet overruns the essayist and his literary skill depends too much on contrivance with the result that his art fails to achieve 'concealment of art.'

Weaknesses in expression like *vaaryaah kenh pyoem naavun* (p 18) or, *loegum laekhun* (p 25), however, are not many; but quite a disturbing lapse is the mixup of morphemic variants of the *-an* and *-aan* outside the parameters of free variation, not only in the same passage but in the same utterance (as on pp 26, 27, 28, 31, 68, 166 and 206). For instance, *hum dapaan* and *yim vanan* in the same breath (p 28).

Blemishes and flaws like these notwithstanding, Pompur's *Kenh Na Ta Kenh* touches an above the average level of articulation and registers a positive contribution to the development of Kashmiri prose in the contemporary context.

EXCERPTS

1

True, sand (by itself) can hold up neither a parapet nor a wall, nor can it twist itself into a slab. Granted, it posseses strength; without it no concrete house can come up, nor a bridge or a cement slab, nor sky-kissing mansions; neither electric poles nor cement sleepers for railway tracks. Can water-melons be piled up one upon another and (similarly) can common folk unite? Yet, every age has had its quota of those who claim to set up sand parapets or to hold them tight. Even today such elements variously hoodwink people and exploit them in the name of their very interest.

You go to cast your vote, you are condescendingly told: Take it easy, Sir; why did you bother to come? We have already cast your vote and selected your candidate for you.

One who is on the verge of defeat shall win with an overwhelming majority of votes; one who is likely to win shall forfeit his deposit. We must win; our dynasty must win, whether by a single vote or by a hundred. To ensure that we must make bold to tear off the ballot paper and devour it; and even to pretend that we have been undone...

People are duped in the name of salt-mountains and oil-tanks in far-off regions and frontiers. Pious representatives would pour out assurances: waters of life would be brought to you by pipelines. Yet, God knows how many territories are still bereft of water to drink, despite repeated promises, even though neighbouring villages of those who wax eloquent in praise of the rulers that be are enjoying these benefits. Villages that were promised to be made London-like

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are yet to witness a bridge or be blessed with a roadway.

Jamhooriyat (Democracy) pp 112-113.

2

Here (in Kashmir) Democracy has all along bewailed its lot. How much shall we recall and recount? Kashmiris seldom chanced to witness a democratic setup thrive; neither when they were bereft of power nor when power came their way. Whosoever came into power was selected from above and imposed on us. People voted for someone and someone else was declared elected. Whom shall we blame? ... Man is athirst for human blood in the name of religion. Who minds the voice of love, brotherhood, equity and justice? Principled politics has come to an end; muscle power has become the order of the day ... Who minded the common folk and when? They were ignored before 1947 as well as after it. Earlier they were crushed under the mountain of want and destitution, waiting for the hour when they would afford to breathe free. They stretched their limbs, no doubt, but lost in stature which might gradually vanish altogether. Just as of late, we did not know which way to go, at present also we know not where we are going to reach. Whatever God wills shall happen. Action, reaction and reaction within reaction is a lengthy process that bears no label. We can afford neither to move ahead nor to go backwards. None knows who is going to be where. Mother Kashmir, Kashmiris and the Kashmiri language torment my mind as questions within questions pierce my heart.

Ta Vony Beyi Karfiv (And Now Curfew Again) pp 160-161

□

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Konkani

STORIES OF THE SOIL

ManoharRai SarDessai

Tarangam (Short Stories) by M.D. Sail, Prakashan, Goa Zag 1991, pp. 162, Rs. 50.

MAHABLESHWAR Datta Sail (b. 1945) hails from the picturesque village of Majali in the district of Karwar on Goa's southern border. Karwar has close social, cultural and linguistic links with Goa. Hence, Sail describes with equal ease the life of the rural folk of Karwar as well as of those of Goa. Sail remarks : "Emotionally, linguistically, culturally and geographically this region is one. We were torn apart because of accidents of history."

Sail is deeply rooted in the soil of this region and so are the persons he describes. Faithful to the soil of Konkan he goes right to the soul of the people. Sail is himself a son of the soil, in more senses than one. He is the son of a farmer, a tiller of the soil, living with the soil and growing up in it, actively participating in various agricultural activities such as sowing, winnowing, harvesting ... the soil of Konkan has coloured his soul. He has also experienced in his very bones the curse of poverty that is the lot of most of the tillers of the soil. Many of Sail's stories are overcast with the pallor of sadness that comes from poverty.

For obvious reasons young Mahableshwar could not pursue his studies beyond S.S.C. At a tender age of seventeen, he joined the Indian army and worked as a soldier of peace during Israel-Egypt conflict in 1963-64, on behalf of the United Nations Organization.

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He also took active part in Indo-Pakistan war in 1965. His life in the army has left an impress both on his life and literature. With his service in the army over, he came back and settled down in Goa.

In the beginning, he wrote in Marathi, contributing short stories to well-known Marathi magazines such as *Satyakatha, Huns, Manus* and also wrote a few plays that were set both in Karwar and Goa. Later, Sail devoted himself to Konkani, his mother-tongue.

When Sail came to Gao he came in close contact with Konkani writers especially Damodar Mauzo who had already made his mark as an able short-story writer. Besides Laxmanrao Sardessai and Chandrakant Keni who can be considered the pioneers of modern Konkani short stories, we have Meena Kakodkar, Sheela Kolambkar, Pundalik Naik, Gajanan Jog and a number of writers who have brought to Konkani literature a new form and content and thrown light on Goan social life as well as on the workings of the minds of man, woman and the child. Sail, with his description of rural life in Karwar bordering Goa and his skilful use of spoken language has come to add to the richness and diversity of Konkani short story.

His collection *Tarangam* (Holy Flags) coming after his collection *Poltoddchem Tarum* (The Ship on the Other Side) contains seventeen stories written on different themes, all bearing the unmistakable 'Sail' stamp. They reflect the rustic life in villages on both sides of the Goan border, Sail crossing the political border with no difficulty. Three of the stories namely, "Sharpishem", "Shennil'lem Mornn" and "Tum porto koso ailo" are connected with the life of the army. But the links with the village are never broken.

Within a short period, Sail has carved for himself a special niche in Konkani literature, with the freshness of his language and the rawness of his descriptions. Though his technique does not vary much from that of his predecessors and contemporaries, his stories offer a new vision of life and a new category of characters. Sail is intensely original, both in his sensitivity and in his mode of expression.

What does he think of his own short stories and literature in general? Sail says, "I have suffered a lot in my life. Thus I can go to the very depths of a story. I have known the meaning of stark poverty. I am proud of the difficulties I had to face—they helped me create my literature. I had no formal education worth the name, neither have I read much. My life is filled to the brim with experiences of all kinds. For me they are the measure of my literature. Though the characters I draw and the problems I discuss are pre-eminently regional, my philosophy of life underlying them is universal."

When asked about his creative process in literature he

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adds : "After having finished writing a story I feel damn tired. Even then I feel my story incomplete. I am never fully satisfied. I try to bring about a synthesis of my philosophy of life and my literary talent. I do a lot of thinking before I start writing a story, I think a lot about the theme and during the process of writing I do my utmost to develop it in the right way ... using the right technique. Some writers do not quite like the term 'technique': for me technique is nothing but control exercised by the author to avoid verbosity and looseness in the structure of his work. It is an integral part of talent, of genius. Creations in nature are proportionate and harmonious. When they are out of proportion they look shapeless and deformed. The same is true of literary creations. I have myself made a few experiments regarding the structure of the short story. In my story "Pennem" (Stop), I have made four characters narrate the same story in different ways."

Most of these stories deal with domestic problems related to marriage, child birth, childlessness, or to social injustice, lust and poverty. They are stories about ordinary people, people we would come across in any village.

The first story "Novem" (The New Corn) describes the desperate life of the poor. Shankar has no rice in his house. The harvest is ripe but the priest says the right *muhurt* has not yet arrived to reap the harvest. Sheer penury drives Shankar to reap his corn and let the people believe that some irreligious thief has mown his crop. This story vividly describes the life of the farmer. Sail uses all the familiar technical terms giving a ring of authenticity to the story.

In "Vitrag" (Frustration) Sail draws the portrait of a mid-wife Pauline who helps other women deliver babies but she herself has no child. When Tulsi a pregnant woman screams and howls in her labour-pains, Pauline asks her to bear it all calmly. "Bear it all calmly" retorts Tulsi, "Have you ever experienced labour pains?" These words are like a stab in the wound. People think she is a spinster but she too had known love. She has a wedding ring. But her lover had died at sea. Pauline decides to give up her profession for good. But when a needy man asks her to assist in his wife's delivery, she cannot say no. Sail has described the situation with poignancy but without sentimentality.

"Rumddaful" (Fig Flower : A Rare Happening) is a heart-breaking description of the situation of families on both sides of the border just before Goa's liberation. Relatives cross the border at the risk of their life. When Mama escapes from the clutches of the Portuguese and crosses the border safe and sound it is a miracle.

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Though a strain of seriousness runs throughout the stories the writer can also add a touch of humour as in the story "Iprit" (Strange).

Sail is primarily a narrator. He uses words that evoke a movement, an action or a feeling ready to burst. Hence his descriptions are short but meaningful enough to add colour to a situation. His descriptions are like well-sketched miniatures, picturesque and appealing and almost self-contained. They are a part of his technique which consist in being precise and concise exercising consciously the greatest economy of words. He is like a skilled marksman who aims at the mark with the least possible effort. This apparent effortlessness is of course the result of painstaking labour. Sail's training as a soldier on the battlefield must have helped him in the field of literature.

EXCERPT

Addganv

"Maya, don't go. These are rainy days. It is cold, it is hot. The kid is too small. If he falls ill, there's no doctor near by in your father's village."

"I don't want to miss the Nagapanchami festival. Moreover, Suman has brought the news that father is not well."

"If you insist on going, go. But leave the child with me."

"If I go, it will be at least for one whole week. And you want me to leave this tiny tot here. He may well stay with you, but how can I live without him?"

"In that case, don't go to Addganv."

"Don't say that, Mum. When the Nagapanchami festival gets near I become impatient. I feel like going there flying or swimming. Nowhere else can you see such a Nagpanchami festival."

"Well then, ask your husband. But remember one thing. In case the kid falls ill, I won't spare you."

She was now so eager to go to her father's house. The memory of her father's house almost choked her. She was nostalgic. It was pouring outside and she was lost in recapturing in her the wet green village of her childhood. In the monsoon heaven descends there. The lush green hillock behind her father's house and the field in front stretching upto the river bank .... Like a young maiden come of age she enjoys her bath in the rain. And all of a sudden the river in spate roars. God knows from where she gets all the waters! Between the house and the river there flows in full force an endless current of water ...

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At Ganesh Chaturthi the whole region is in full bloom. In the field, flowers dance on the ears of corn, mountains and hills are bedecked with wild flowers. Some fragrant flower or other swings on every creeper, on every bush. As a child, she had roamed these hills, breathed in this fragrance, she used to be intoxicated by it. The wind had driven her mad and she used to run, dance, play .... When the river was in spate, all the roads outside the courtyard would be blocked. Water alone reigned supreme every where. On the river bank there was an enormous Banyan tree, only its large leafy umbrella was now visible. The Sudras and the Bhandaris living on the bank deserted their houses and took shelter in her father's house. Anxiety, fear and expectation were writ large on their faces.

There was still time for her husband to come home from the office. She looked out of the window and eagerly waited for him to come. Inside, her son Sunil was playing with his gran'ma. She babbled with the child and amused him. She listened to their prattle with delight and waited for her husband.

Offering her husband a cup of tea, she said, "I am going to my mother's house for Nagapanchami festival. I shall be staying for one week."

"You shouldn't go this year. I say no."

"Why no?"

"Ballu is still a kid. Your father's village is a deserted island. When the river floods the bank, none dares cross it even by boat. And you want to go there in this rain, with a babbling child?"

"Do you mean to say that there are no kids in my father's village? I and my sisters and brothers have grown up there. I won't listen to you. I will go and go I will."

"I won't let you go." His voice became louder. He lost his temper. Any way, he was hot tempered. Maya was frustrated. She went about her domestic chores without saying a word. She had no food at night. She only drank water. When her husband approached her and touched her, she turned her back. When he came too close, she muttered, "Will you let me go to-morrow?"

Her husband turned aside, covered his face with a blanket and slept. Maya turned her face away and fell asleep.

Maya got up in the morning but had no peace of mind. She went to the backyard. The *ananta* tree was in full bloom and looked like a flower-bedecked holy chariot. The hillock behind her father's house also becomes white at the approach of Nagapanchami with white *fulpatri* leaves. Now, before her mind's eye bunches of *fulpatri* leaves dance and they beckon to her. Her ears are filled with the roar of

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the flooded river ... Her father lying on the cot sees her, gets up with delight and says, "Is that you my daughter?" and he takes the child in his arms and cuddles him ...

She was now almost desperate. When her husband was ready to go to office, she came all of a sudden close to him and imploringly said, "I want to go, dear. Don't say 'no'." I shall be there for four days only and then return." For a moment, the husband looked at her steadily and with anger and said "Well, go, go. Have your way. Go."

He put his hand into his pocket, took out whatever money he had and pressed it into her hand, and left in a hurry. When he had crossed the courtyard, Maya said, "Well, bye!" □

Translated by M. Sardessai



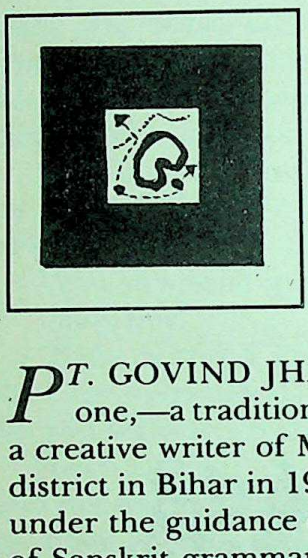
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Maithili

NARRATIVES OF THE MIND

Sureshwar Jha



Samak Pauti (Short Stories) by Pt. Govind Jha, Bhakha Prakashan, Bihar; 1990, pp. 108, Rs. 20/-

PT. GOVIND JHA, as he often describes himself, is a, three-in-one,—a traditional Sanskrit scholar, a professional translator and a creative writer of Maithili. Born in a remote village of Madhubani district in Bihar in 1923, he studied Sanskrit grammar and literature under the guidance of his father. Not bound by traditional learning of Sanskrit grammar and literature alone, he later betrayed a keen interest in modern Indian languages like Bengali, Assamese, Nepali, Oriya and Urdu.

Pt. Jha has to his credit some thirty works in Maithili and Hindi. Linguistics has been his chosen field of scholarship, translation and lexicography his job and, creative writing his hobby and intellectual pursuit. His drama *Basat* was a trendsetter for Maithili stage. Besides this work, he has to his credit dramas like *Rukmini Haran* (1990), *Rodhanath, Antim Pranam* (1982) and *Raja Shiv Singh*. He has also nine books in the fields of grammar, lexicography and criticism. He has also several works of translation and edited volumes to his credit and got the 1993 translation award for translating *The History of Nepali Literature* into Maithili.

Samak Pauti (Sama's Casket) is a collection of eighteen short stories written over a period of four decades. 'Antim Ekanni' (Last one-anna Coin) dates back to 1961 and 'Bheekh' (Beggary) was written in 1987.

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Those stories can be divided into two broad categories. A majority of them—from the first category—are social in themes and satirical in expression. In the second category we have stories like 'Samak Pauti' (Sama's Casket), 'Phoolak Chot' (A Floral Wound), 'Ek Duralabh Jantuk Khoj' (Search for a Rare Animal) etc. which centre round human emotions and sentiments.

Jha's stories are brilliant object-lessons in narrative art. They are short and pithy, with little rigmarole or obscurity. His story-frames are state-of-the-art crucibles for the extraction of home-truths. 'Plotless', 'surrealistics' or 'absurd' forms of the art of modern short story are not his cup of tea. A traditional Pandit of Sanskrit language and literature, Jha knows his Gunadhya, his Vishnu Sharma and his mythology too well to deviate into alien and abstract forms of story-telling. However Jha's stories have well laid-out plots for his morals to strike root and grow.

Take for example, the first story with its curious title, 'Phoolak Chot' (A Floral Wound): The theme explores how a change in economic status brings about a change in human relationship. One time simple and loving village *bhabhi* (Elder brother's wife) is now the wife of a big officer. She lives in a posh house and her figure and fashion have changed. Her *devar* (husband's younger brother) from the village is now a poor relation. In shabby *dhoti* and *kurta* and with a *jhola* in hand he pays her a visit. Initially she does not recognise him and when she does she laughs at his dress and unshaven face. *Devar* had come at lunch time and was expecting sumptuous dinner, but instead he gets a cup of coffee and four biscuits. He does not find courage to confess that he is hungry, so, during his *bhabhi's* temporary absence from the house, *devarji* takes out *chura* from his *jhola* and starts munching it. This scene as also another, where he is served *bhat-dal* and asks for more and the *bhabhi* fills his *thali* with a lot of that and snaps him eating are hilarious. The *devar* comes away with the impression that this *bhabhi* is not the same one who had loved him once as her younger brother. Wealth and status have vitiated the sweet relationship. His dress and simplicity now look comic in the eyes of the fashionable *bhabi*. In this little space of the story, containing one scene, there is a lot of liveliness, comedy and irony. It has all the ingredients of a successful scene from a drama.

'Samak Pauti' published in 1963 had become instantly popular. 'Sama-Chakeba' is a ritual of pseudo-religious origins observed by the women of Mithila during the lunar fortnight of the *kartik* month. In a festival spread over a week, women declare and celebrate an unwaning affection for their brothers by offering worship to minia-

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ture earthen idols of Sama and Chakeba. There is also a third idol and that is of Chugila, which means a back-biter. Ladies give Chugila a long and bushy tail and at the end of the festival set fire to Chugila's tail and also beat it with sticks.

Written in the background of Sama festival the present story is a tragic tale of a poor widowed sister, who year after year, waits for her brother to come during the festival to acknowledge her affection for him but to no avail. So one Sama day when brothers are being feted in adjoining houses, she collects her Sama idols in a casket and goes out on a sentimental journey to find out her brother. This is a frankly sentimental and melodramatic piece. Nonetheless, the story touches the heart. The locale and the details are realistic.

Short, pithy and to the point, every story of Pt. Jha, like Tolstoy's fables, has an artistically conceived plot and a sharply focussed moral. The strongest point of Jha as a story-teller is his intelligent and often times, ingenuous construction of plots. Though his stories have clear-cut morals, they are never moralistic. In point of economy of words Jha is the closest among our practitioners of the art of the story to the Chekhovian ideal. Chekhov once suggested that if, per chance in a story you mention a gun hanging on the wall, by the end of the story, it must be shown to have been fired. Govind Jha's diction is natural, neither colloquial nor pedantic. All his stories are of great thematic and dramatic interest.

EXCERPT

Antim-Ekanni

Know me? I am the last one-anna piece in the pocket of my master. On the first date of the month we were as many as four thousand brothers. But by this last date of the month, three thousand nine hundred nine of my brothers are gone, leaving me alone. I will tell you what happened in the last two days. You must be considering me insignificant but when you have listened to the accounts of the last two days, you will know how fortunate, how valuable and what a 'wonder' I am. The problems I had to face from the evening of the 29th till the morning of the 30th and the way I got over them: this is what I will relate to you now.

It was a long walk and my master was tired. He did not have enough money for rickshaw-fare, so he thought he might instead have some tea to beat the fatigue. He was aware that I was in his pocket but when he put his hand inside it he could not locate me.

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The tea-vendor asked, "Want a cup of tea, Babu?" My master replied, "No, thank you. I have just had a cup."

On reaching home as my master was taking out his bunch of keys and I fell down on the floor with a tinkling noise. My master picked me up with respect and put me back into his pant's pocket.

After escaping from the first danger I had a sound sleep throughout the night. During the last dregs of sleep in the morning my master muttered in dream, "Ekanni ... One Ekanni ... only one." My mistress gave him a pod and asked, "What the hell are you babbling in your sleep?" He woke up rubbing his eyes and replied, "I was dreaming that I had taken a cup of tea at a teashop, but I had no money to pay for it, and just for an 'anna' piece the vendor had caught hold of my collar and was thrashing me."

Mistress replied, "How dreadful! If dream you must then why not dream about a lakh of rupees? How degrading to dream about an 'ekanni'?" □

Translated by Sureshwar Jha

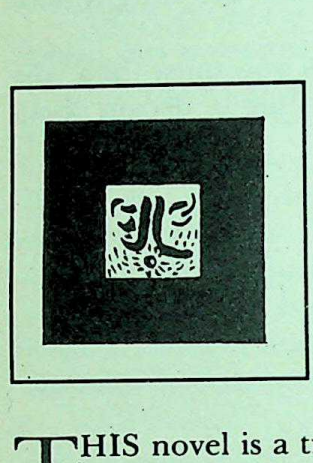
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Malayalam

A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL NARRATIVE

M. Leelavathy



Daivathinte Kannu (The Eye of God) N.P. Mohamed pp. 142+4; Rs. 25/- Pub. S.P.C.S. Kottayam, Kerala

THIS novel is a tragic story of a family, in the surface structure, and in the deep structure, the tragedy which the human race will have to face inevitably if better sense does not prevail on it in dealing with problems of survival. The double dimension in its structure reminds one of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. But except in the humanistic anxiety regarding the future of mankind, there is no resemblance at all between the two works either in theoretical concept or in the architectonics of narratology.

The family-story in the surface structure can be summarised as follows :

"Narakampura" is an aristocratic Muslim family in a village in central Kerala. A decision had been taken to innovate the residence and work had been started. From there begins a series of disasters. Ultimately death struck the head of the family first. Subsequently it would knock off one person every year. It was considered an ill-omen. The construction had been suspended after the foundation-work. At the time of the commencement of the story, Koyassan, eldest son of the previous head of the family, was the decision-maker, though his sister, Mariam, is an equally authoritative voice in the house. Their brother Abdu is educated and employed in the city of Calicut. Abdu's son, an innocent teenager, his mother, Mariam, Koyassan, Ummu

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(Koyassan's youngest sister) and Mohamadali, another brother of Koyassan, mentally deranged and kept in chains are the members of the house. The narrator of the story is the boy. Developments of events are depicted as he views them. Ummu, his aunt, is elder to him only by a few years. She is a storehouse of fantastic, mysterious stories and tells him of the devils (*bhutas*) and snakes who guard the treasures concealed within the womb of the earth; she knows also wonderful stories of seasonal changes in Nature. Earth and nature thus become parts of the life of the boy in whose tender mind fantasy and reality are imprinted as equally strong sensual experiences.

Mohamadali was looked upon by the children as a pathetic victim of the wrath of the devils. Koyassan who is a ruthless mercenary has no fine sentiments for anyone—He had been a terror to his wife who was finally abandoned. He looked upon Mohamadali as a disgrace to the family. Ummu was of marriageable age and the presence of a mad fellow in the house would spoil prospects of a good alliance. However, a good proposal came. The fellow was drugged and kept in concealment when the bridegroom's party from Cochin arrived to see Ummu. The marriage went off well.

Mohamadali once manages to break the chains and commits certain acts of sacrilege which drive Koyassan into a rage. He knocks down the fellow to his death. According to Mariam, the tragedy is the work of the devils and the enraged snakes. She finds solace in Koran and prayers. Koyassan, an irreligious fellow, secretly makes plans to retrieve the treasure and employs occultists for the purpose. Elaborate preparations are made for the performance of certain occult rituals. The boy is used as a 'medium' between the devils and the occultist. All these are done in the absence of Mariam who had gone to Cochin to be with Ummu at the time of her delivery, the boy's mother, an innocent, native woman could be easily hoodwinked. The boy, under the spell of hypnotic suggestions by the occultist points to certain spots on the foundation-structure as seats of treasures, but on digging up the soil they discover nothing. Thereafter the occultist declares the devils thirst for the blood of the boy and the treasures will remain hidden until he is sacrified. Koyassan secretly schemes to perform the sacrifice, while his sister-in-law, unaware of the ultimate purpose, looks upon the rituals as inevitable means to appease the devils. Mariam returns just in time and she smells a rat. As part of the rituals, Koyassan had arranged felling of trees in the compound and had employed workers. The first thing she did was to order all the fellows out. She extracted the truth from the occultist. Shocked and furious, she confronted her all-powerful brother, and

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challenged his authority. Having been exposed thus, he realised that all his schemes were foolish, futile and empty. All the endeavours secretly pursued for a long time crumbled to dust. May be due to the shock and the agony, he had a paralytic stroke. When the schemes of sacrificial rites were exposed, the boy's mother lost her mental balance. With a scythe in her hand she attacked the occultist who narrowly escaped. She grew so violent that she had to be chained. The hypnotic rites had already deprived the poor boy of his normal mental faculties. On being chained the mother screamed terribly and called for him in a pathetic way; obviously she thought he was being taken to be sacrificed. The boy thought his mother was chained as they were going to murder her. He is also by now a victim of mental derangement thoroughly. He feels that he is the only help to his mother and all others are to be killed to save her. He also grows too violent and is to be fettered.

The name given to the house as we have seen, is 'narakampura'. 'Narakam' is hell. The house literally turns out to be an inferno. This leads us to the deep structure. Earth is being converted into an inferno by men of insatiable hunger for wealth, pleasure and power. There are three categories of characters in the novel : innocent children, well-meaning loving women, and cruel, crazy, greedy, selfish, attrocious men. They represent (1) the growing and future generations of mankind (2) the nature-lovers and the ecologists (3) exploiters of earth's resources, consumerists, anthopocentric industrialists. The novelist has made use of several aspects of human life and nature and ordinary images occurring in the stream of consciousness of a child, in such a subtle way that the above mentioned wider ranges of life are inevitably brought to our mind. The "treasure" stands for all the earthly resources. The "foundation" is the foundation of culture and heritage built up by the ancestors. Seasonal changes, plants, trees, and similar natural, features are interwoven into the thoughts, memories and experiences of the narrator who possesses a natural affinity for all that is of the earth. Thus, well-being of the human race preserved on an ecologically balanced system of life comes as a natural meaning of the concept of happiness in the mind of the boy. The occult rites are elaborately described in the novel. Symbolically they stand for the achievements of modern science and technology including nuclear power which can be used for the annihilation of the race. In modern world Ecology and Feminism go hand in hand, the woman who forbids the felling of trees speaks aloud for all the ecologists of the world. The "treasure" is to be discovered and used for the well-being of all in the family. In his blinding avarice and

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ambitious endeavours Koyassan forgets that the well-being of the whole family is centered on the boy. If he is lost, who is left to make use of the treasure? In the same way, mankind is engaged in a rat-race of consumerism forgetful of the fact that generations to come are heirs to the resources of our precious earth. The guardians of the 'treasure' are *bhutas* in the story. Though the term can be translated as "devil", the functions attributed to *bhutas* are not all devilish. *Bhutas* are protectors of all the regenerative powers found on the planet. See what the boy thinks with respect to their functions: "You drink the rainwater; it is because you drink the rainwater, the seeds of fear sprout into seedlings. Otherwise they would have perished. You came to rescue them. You came to the rescue of the soil. The soil will love in return." Obviously, such functions as the child attributes to the *bhutas* are not devilish but divine. The *bhutas* are the universal forces that keep alive the regenerative power of all animate things on earth.

The novel negates the anthropocentric view of life. The planet is the dwelling place of all animate beings and all of them are inheritors of the earth. It was the dictum of Descartes (*cogito ergosum*—I think, therefore I exist) that divided the world into shelves—Man and non-man. The scientific technology deveoped from this dichotomy, and therefore the anthropocentric view of life has been the driving force behind scientific research, discoveries and technological revolution. The thirst for power led man to the discovery of nuclear power. Each commercial nuclear reactor is said to produce four hundred to five hundred pounds of plutonium per year. One pound of the element, if uniformly distributed, could potentially induce lung-cancer in every person on earth (*The Turning Point*, Fritjof Capra, P. 247). It is the most dangerous of radioactive byproducts. It remains poisonous for at least 500000 years. What right do we, the members of a few generations, have to endanger the lives of thousands of generations to come? This is the indirect question posed by the deep structure of the novel. Koyassan has no right to sacrifice the life of the boy in order to fulfil his foolish, selfish ambition. We, the Koyassans of the age of technology, have no right to endanger the lives of our successors.

It is not this philosophy alone that makes the work effective as a novel. The fabric of the family story is woven with remarkable dexterity and skill. The philosophy of love and humanism alone can captivate any reader, even the one unaware of the intellectual element in the deep structure. A literary work is what it is to the reader and not what the writer intends it to be or what another reader interprets and claims it to be. Therefore, there may be different kinds of inter-

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preters. "The Eye of God" is the sun. The sun observes "everything under the sun." This concept is not Islamic alone; for Hindus too sun is 'Karmasakshi.' The 'eye' reddens when Man errs. The narrator boy is guided by this faith. He has not studied the 'Second Law of thermodynamics'. But he has very well understood its implications by mere intuition. Child is the father of man. The narrator-child in the novel is wise enough to be the father of modern man. □



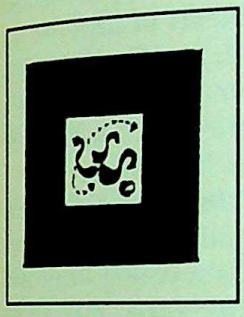
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Rajasthani

FINE NARRATIVE ART

Shyam Mathur



Adhura Supna(short stories) by Nrisingh Rajpurohit, Jodhpur: Rajasthani Granthagar, 1991, pp. 164, Rs. 75/-

THE art of story telling has been practised in Rajasthan from time immemorial. Night-long sessions used to be held in the villages where a large number of people would sit and listen to a story-teller. There used to be stories from the folklore besides tales of battles, romances and, of course, famines that are so frequent here. Story writing in Rajasthani in its present form began about four decades or so ago. Vijay Dan Detha, Anna Ram "Sudama", Karni Dan Barhath and Mool Chand "Pranesh" are considered to be the pioneers in this field. Nrisingh Rajpurohit also began writing at about the same time and it is to his credit that he is still creative especially as prose is rarer than poetry in Rajasthani.

Born in 1924 at Khandap, a small village in Barmer district in West Rajasthan, Rajpurohit got an environment at home that helped him to become a story writer. As a young boy he used to read stories from scriptures and other books to the members of the family. He got to read Prem Chand and Sarat Chandra when he was in the eighth standard and he was inspired by their writings. Later he completed his education with M.A. and Ph.D. degrees.

His first story 'Punn Ro Kaam' (A Good Deed) was published in 1951. Thereafter he has written unceasingly. He has to his credit seven collections of his own stories, six books translated into

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Rajasthani from other languages and two edited works. Rajpurohit has received several awards for his works. They include Rajasthan Sahitya Akademi Award (1969), Shri Prithvi Raj Rathore Smriti Puraskar from the same academy (1979), Shri Soorya Mal Mishran Shikhar Puraskar of Rajasthan Bhasha Sahitya Evam Sanskriti Akademi (1989) and the most prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award (1993) besides many awards from other social and literary organisations. He was also given the Teacher's award at the State and the National Levels in 1971 and 1974 respectively.

Adhura Supna (The Unrealized Dreams), the award winning book, has nineteen stories that look closely at the life in rural Rajasthan from various angles. Simple, innocent and God-fearing people, their hopes and aspirations, success and failure, the darkness of superstition and ignorance, corrupt administration, its vested interests and wicked stooges, Rajpurohit has a gamut of subjects in store for his reader. He has etched out the realities of life with an ease and simplicity—realities that are true and bitter. However, his stories leave a message that upholds the higher values and the good in life. The teacher in Rajpurohit can easily be perceived in his stories.

'Bidai' (Adieu) highlights the problem of the migration of the educated rural folk to the cities and breaking families. An old mother is made to leave the house in which she came as a young bride and never left it even for a single day for about fifty years. Her agony has been brought out effectively and her tearful farewell touches the reader. 'Ek Pao Daru' (A Pint of Liquor) deals with alcoholism and crimes related with it that come to the village with prosperity. In 'Afsari' the ambitious parents are blind to their son's limited capabilities and they expect him to become a doctor or an I.A.S. officer. He obviously fails to fulfil their desires and just manages to become a teacher in a private school in the village.

'Deeth' (The Vision) deals with the savage practice of killing a girl-child at birth by poisoning or strangling while 'Dhanni Bhua' (Aunt Dhanni) tells the story of a brave widow who keeps the village ruffians at bay and turns a Chandi (The Goddess of Destruction) to protect her chastity. 'Naag Pooja' attempts to expose the corruption in the police and the exploitation by them of the illiterate villagers.

Human relations form the central theme in some other stories. In 'Pratikriya' some rowdy students, who had been given corporal punishment by a teacher, take their revenge and kill him. The story provides an analysis of the declining teacher-pupil relations that are again discussed in 'Guru Dakshina'. In 'Sugra' Amring is indebted to Devi Singh for his help at the time of famine. When Devi's children

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get trapped in a big fire Amring saves their lives by risking his own life. 'Teerth Yatra' underlines the ideal of 'Service before self.'

Nrisingh Rajpurohit is a clever narrator. In his own simple way he is able to get the reader involved, draw his attention to the realities and provide some food for his thought.

EXCERPTS

1. Adhura Supna

In the scuffle with the goons not only Babuji got some injuries but Nema too received a couple of knife-wounds on his arm. Information was sent to the police station in the night only. Before the sun rise the police jeep stood in the village. The goons were taken to the police station and given a good thrashing. They revealed the conspiracy. One of Babuji's sons was employed in the police department. He got a message on the telephone and he came running. Babuji and Nema were taken to the hospital and got admitted there.

Once more the name of the village made the front-page news in the dailies. The press gave a detailed coverage to the case. The matter also came up in the State Assembly and a star question was asked. It turned out to be an important matter.

On getting well Babuji prepared to return to the village. His relatives tried to dissuade him but he did not heed their advice. He said, "Presently the village needs me and in this difficult hour I cannot sit hiding my face. I cannot leave the village until such time that my dreams regarding it are fulfilled. To quit under fear will be cowardly. I would prefer death to giving up, come what may I must go back to the village."

They all knew his nature too well. It was futile to do or say anything after that. The case took four or five months in the court. Witnesses were presented and evidences produced. Alongwith the goons the *sarpanch* and Ram Lal also got three month's imprisonment.

2. Bidai

Soon the house was full of women and children of the neighbourhood who had come to see them off. Everyone repeated the same words, "Maaji, come back soon." The old woman met each one affectionately. Pravin saw that her eyes were moist. She could not speak due to a lump in her throat. She was like a girl going to her in-laws' house for the first time.

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As she crossed the threshold of the house to leave, the tears that she had checked with great effort flowed rapidly down her cheeks. Resting her head against the wall she started crying loudly. Even the women of the neighbourhood started crying. A strange scene was created. Pravin had never imagined such a situation. He was taken aback. He held his mother's hand trying to console her. With great difficulty he managed to quieten her.

As she was about to leave after locking the house Vimla arrived. The old woman wiped her tears and, holding Vimla's hand, she said, "I was waiting for you. It is good that you have come. Yesterday I forgot to tell you one important thing. In the cellar a cat has littered. The kittens have not even opened their eyes yet. Please feed them on my behalf with a pint of milk everyday for about ten days. This is the third time that it has littered in that place."

"Make haste, mother, it is time for the bus to arrive," Pravin said.

"Yes let us go, Son." Her hands shook as she handed over the key of the house to Vimla. She turned once again to look at the peepul tree. The green leaves tossed in the wind as if they were bidding adieu. □

Translated by Shyam Mathur

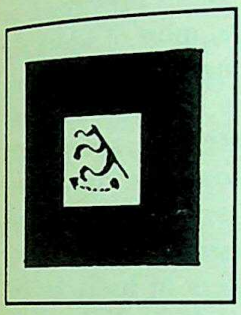
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Sanskrit

REVIVING THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

H. Balasubramaniam



Jayantika (Prose Romance) by Jaggu Vakulabhushana, Bangalore: Baladhanvi Jaggu Alwar Iyenger, Malalaxmi Mandir, I Main, Palace Lower Orchards, Bangalore-560 003 pp. 224, Rs. 34/-

JAYANTIKA, a Sanskrit prose romance composed by a contemporary Sanskrit scholar in classical diction is a worthy addition to the rich heritage of Sanskrit literature. The genius of Sanskrit is poetic by nature and one can find a galaxy of poets in Sanskrit who have produced epics, lyrics, *Champus* and *Muktakas* profusely in a fluent style, but good prose-writers are few; and far between. Truly speaking, composing prose is really a challenge; it demands vast and deep knowledge to the degree of versatility besides complete grip and command over the language to narrate the episodes and present men and nature in a captivating style. It is rightly said—*'gadyam kavinam nikasham vadanti'*—'prose-composition is the touch-stone for poets.' There is another saying—*"Padyam vadhyam gadyam hridyam'* which means 'verse is torturous while prose is captivating and enchanting.' Taking into consideration the features and framework of prose-romance, *Jayantika*, the present work, well compares with *Kadambari*, the celebrated *gadyakavya* of ancient times in content, texture and style.

Baladhanvi Jaggu Alwar Iyenger, celebrated author of 58 works in Sanskrit and seven in Kannada, was born in a family of Sanskrit scholars in the year 1902, at Chitraghosha in Mandya District of Karnataka. It is a well known pilgrim centre of Srivaishnavas. His

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grandfather Jaggu Singharacharya was an authority in Visishtadvaita philosophy. He was initiated into literature and Shastra by none other than his paternal uncle Jaggu Venkatacharya who was regarded as one of the great masters of the language. He studied all available *granthas* in Sanskrit, starting from *Amarakosa to Rasagangadhara* besides *Samkhyayoga* and *Sutrabhashyas*. Obtaining the degree of *vidwan* in literature and *Samkhyayoga*, he entered the profession of teaching Sanskrit, a vocation he pursued for over six decades.

He started his literary career at the tender age of 18 years and has successfully experimented in six areas—viz *Nataka, Mahakavya, Gitakavya, Champu, Gadyakavya* and *Shastra*. Thus, he has produced 58 works in Sanskrit amongst them dramas claim the major share, 21 in number. His works like *Adbhuta dutam* (Mahakavya), *Pratijna Kautilya* and *Adbhutamsukam* (Dramas) have been prescribed as text-books for university students while his plays, most of which are based on masterpieces like *Shakuntalam, Oorubhanga* and *Mudrarakshasa* have been acclaimed by scholars and critics for their dramatic and poetic excellence. Thus he is a teacher by profession, a playwright by choice, an exponent of Vishishadvaita philosophy by conviction.

A recepient of numerous awards, medals and titles like *Rajya Prashasti* and *Kayam Puraskar*, Jaggu Vakula Bhushana has been honoured by the Maharaja of Mysore and the President of India. He has been conferred the titles of *Shastrakaviratna* and *Vidya Visharada* by Yatiraja Math and Karnatak Sanskrit Parishad.

The plot of *Jayantika* is complex. The main story is narrated by Chandadanstra, a monster, turned-gandharva, to Jivasena, the hero. The hero himself is unaware of his past history comprising two-thirds of the work. This is because the hero and heroine assume two births—(1) Charuvaktra and Sougandhini and (2) Jivasena and Jayantika. The role played by Jayantika, the heroine in her second birth is so prominent that the author has aptly named the work after her name.

The prose romance running to 224 pages is arranged in 5 chapters called *laharis*. The first three chapters cover the story of Charuvaktra and Sougandhini while the story of Jivasena and Jayantika is told in the last two *laharis*. Here is a chapterwise synopsis of the story :

1. Vimatakesari, King of Vaijyanti is liked by his subjects as he is a just king. But unfortunately he patronises his friend Vrishaskandha to such an extent that the latter dares to cast his evil eye on the queen Varamalini. A quarrel erupts on this count in which

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the wicked friend kills the pious king. The queen flees to the forest where a male child is born to her in a few months. Charuvaktra grows as a handsome boy and finds from his mother the reasons of their plight. On hearing the gruesome story he takes a vow to punish Vrishaskandha and regain his kingdom. He performs severe penance and pleases the gods Indra, Siva and Brahma. They approach Lord Narayana and plead for Charuvaktra. Lord Narayana bestows the boy with rare weapons and blesses him.

2. Charuvaktra returns to his mother and seeks her blessings. Then he sets upon Vijayayatra. Conquering several kingdoms he builds up a huge army and ultimately defeats Vrishaskandha. He punishes the wicked man making him prostrate at the feet of Varamalini. The citizens are delighted at the return of Charuvaktra, son of their beloved king. He is coronated and continues to get the good counsel of the old Minister Marunmala.
3. Once Charuvaktra undertakes a hunting expedition. Thrilled and excited in the hunting pursuit, he is taken interior in the dense forest by a deer, which disappears in a thick grove. The king inadvertently hits a beautiful maid. Realising his folly, Charuvaktra goes to her proximity for apologising. Even in the midst of agony and pain, Sougandhini the young princess, recognises him and narrates her story. Abandoned by her mother she was brought up by a poor man by name Dhamana. On his death, the destitute girl was found by Dirghasatra and his disciples and brought up in their *ashrama*. From Dirghasatra she comes to know that she is the daughter of Sugandha, the king of Mathura and she is destined to marry Charuvaktra the king of Vijayanthi. Cursing her fate she collapses. Shocked by the turn of events, grief stricken Charuvaktra also dies on the spot. Indra appears on the scene in the form of a hunter and revives both of them as new born children. The hunter instructs the disciples of *ashrama* to handover the male child to the king of Aribhikarapuri and the girl child to the queen of Hemapur. In the meantime, the companions of Charuvaktra come there to enquire about their king. Dirghasatra sends message to Varamalini that she should wait patiently for her son's return.
4. King Vajrabahu of Anibhikarapuri names the child as Jivasena, who grows to be a handsome prince. The girl child Jayantika grows in Hemapura as a pretty princess well-versed in all forms of arts and crafts besides politics and oratory. Seeing a picture of Jivasena she falls in love with him. Enchanted by her beauty, Chitraratha, a Gandharva King, makes advances towards her

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unmindful of her resentment. Enraged, she curses Chitraratha to be a *rakshasa*; the relief has to come on being slain by Jivasena himself. In his monster form, Chandadanstra plays havoc in the hermitages of *rishis* who reach the court of Jivasena for rescue. (The *gadyakavya* commenses with this scene and Jivasena slays Chandadanstra who regains his Gandharva form and narrates the entire story upto this point). As per the direction of the Gandharva, Jivasena rushes to Hemapur to meet Jayantika's suggestion, Jivasena whisks her away in order to avert her proposed marriage with some other prince. Both get married by mutual consent and on their way they are compelled to enjoy their honeymoon in a cave due to lightning and torrential rains. All her efforts to trace him prove futile. Incidentally she meets a Tapasi who accommodates Jayantika in her cave. The Tapasi herself was the prince of Chitrapura, called Sukesa, but was cursed to be a woman. Jayantika, who was already pregnant delivers a male child in the cave. The lovely boy is lost in the forest at the age of six. It was impossible to trace Jivasena and the boy without getting power and authority. As per the plan chalked out by the Tapasi, Jayantika assumes the form of Sukesa with the help of the *ratnamala* given by Tapasi, and gets royal power and command. Tapasi also moves to the palace.

5. Jayantika, in the form of Sukesa tries her best to search out her husband and son in near and far off places. To her bad luck, she loses her *ratnamala* without which nothing could move. Jayantika and Tapasi pray before Goddess Durga and vows to sacrifice the person from whom the *ratnamala* would be recovered. They instruct their trusted servants to complete the mission within five days. The *ratnamala* is spotted with a cowherd boy who was brought to Chitrapura. The boy is handed over to the butcher at Durga Temple to be sacrificed before the goddess. The butcher was none other than Jivasena who was transformed as Chandala by his fate. The butcher develops affection for the boy and both of them narrate their stories and Jivasena realises that he is to kill his own son. The royal order has to be executed. He gives a letter to the soldiers to be handed over to the king, beheads the boy and sacrifices himself before the goddess. From the letter, Jayantika realises that as a result of her vow she has lost both her husband and son. She pushes to the temple and witnessing the ghastly scene sets out to sacrifice herself. The goddess appears and revives Jivasena and the boy, and showers blessings on them. Tapasi becomes real Sukesha and the king of Chitrapura. Jivasena regains

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his kingdom and Virasena, son of Jivasena, inherits the kingdom of Hemapur from his maternal grandfather.

The plot, in spite of its complex nature, is enchanting because it is a fine blending of tale-motifs current in Indian folklore and epics, skilfully interwoven in a single story by the fertile imagination of the author.

The author has adopted a novel way of story-telling in which the thread of the story is taken by its characters themselves in succession. And at every turning point, the past history of the hero or heroine is narrated or a new character is introduced. The flash-back technique of modern story-telling is nicely employed in the present prose romance, arousing the curiosity of the reader and maintaining his interest intact throughout. In *Jayantika*, characters have little personal importance. It is true that the story commences with the wickedness of Vrishakandha an evil character, but as the story progresses tragic events happen by unexpected cricumstances, or as a result of past deeds or some curse which are beyond human control.

Another peculiarity about the characters of *Jayantika* is that women and children take a leading role with courage and conviction, while the male characters are generally passive and mere tools in the hands of fate. By giving prominence to women and children, the author of *Jayantika* has boosted the morale of the weaker and neglected lot of the society; he deserves special admiration on this count.

The authors' insight in material management is worthy of attention and praise. The mixing up of myth and reality is cleverly effected in the work. As regards the introduction of supernatural elements and miracles, it is an integral part of Sanskrit classics, and the readers of ancient literature do not find any thing odd in it. The author uses them to carry history forward and to arouse the readers' emotional response. This is also the case with the intervention of the divine personalities.

The work is full of picturesque descriptions of the land and rivers, sleepy villages and humming cities, the charming green hills, innocent village-folks, cowherds playing flutes while grazing their cattles and the advent of seasons with all their beauty. The author is quite at home with traditional expressions with long compounds, rolling adjectives, similies, metaphors and other verbal refinements.

The author has developed all the nine *rasas* as proposed in the prologue. Amongst them *veera* (heroism) and *adbhuta* (wonder) dominate the work. The sentiments of love and pathos also receive careful treatment.

The most pleasing aspect of *Jayantika* is the language which has

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a flawless flow. The author has employed a heavily ornamented and alliterative diction with such ease and dexterity that it appears spontaneous. In some paragraphs the rhythmic arrangement is superb; there are many pieces where words and compounds having *laghu-matras* (short vowels) only are employed, while in the successive paragraphs *dirgha-matra* (long vowels) occur in a line, and in many places the mixed type is tried with the intermittance of long vowels and clusters.

The genre of *gadyakavya* is so much trodden that it gives no room for any novelty. Yet the author is confident in his creative ability and moves about in jungle of thick and dense prose like a majestic lion.

EXCERPT

Charuvaktra, overwhelmed with joy and nectar-like bliss, prostrated at the feet of Lord Narayana. Pleased with him, Narayana listed him spontaneously; His heart was filled with mercy and compassion. The Lord of the universe told him, "O my child, you are free to demand whatever you like I shall fulfil your heart's desire here and now." Hearing this, Charuvaktra, humbly submitted with folded hands, "O God of gods, being ominiscient you know my heart. Even then you want me to disclose it myself. Let it be; your orders cannot be disobeyed. My Lord! I am desirous of winning the battle and regaining my Kingdom. So, kindly bestow me with infalliable weapons." Thus intreated, Lord Mukunda, with an enchanting smile, granted him divine weapons like *kodanda* (powerful bow) resounding like hundreds and thousands of metallic bells to terrify the enemys' belt; the bow was accompanied with numerous sharp arrows. The Lord blessed the boy, "You shall now destroy the entire force of opponents in no time. Rule the land unopposed for a long time." So saying Lord Narayana disappeared.

—From *Prathama Lahari* (Chapter I)

On being entreated by him, Varamalini, engrossed in a state of dream, embraced Charuvaktra tightly with her arms. Enfolding her son affectionately in her hands, she blessed him. The proud mother told him in a choked voice: "O My child! It is by providence that you are back here again. You have proved your worth by invoking the mercy and blessing of Lord Narayana. I have nothing new to preach to you. My boy! You are too young to perform such a severe penance. This sort of mental tranquility is difficult to attain even for sages and rishis who are immersed in meditation. What you have achieved is impossible even for great yogis. Further, you have now resolved to

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undertake the next task. Hence, out of affection, I propose to tell you something beneficial for you. Listen and contemplate on my words. The world is full of wicked people. No one is devoid of self-ishness. The earth is dominated by bad characters and villains. The entire atmosphere is full of hatred and trust. Even relatives cannot be trusted, for they tend to deceive when occasion arises. The goddess of wealth is also partial to those wielding muscle power. The kings see through the eyes of their spies ...." □

From *Dvitiya Lahari* (Chapter II)

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and Sahitya Akademi Award for *Tamas* in 1975. Add : 8/30, East Patel Nagar, New Delhi-110 008.

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The Sacred and the Profane

THE creative freedom of writers has always been under attack from various quarters: at times it is the authoritarian state that curtails the writers' freedom as it happened in all the totalitarian regimes of the right and the left and in the dictatorial phases even in democratic countries; at times the threat comes from terrorist political groups as we saw in Punjab and still see in Kashmir; and at other times it comes from religious fundamentalist groups and organisations. Such communal forces have become especially active in the last few years all over the world threatening the writers with exile and even death. I do not deny that even these groups have the freedom to express their protest in civilized and democratic ways; but when resentment degenerates into threats to life, religious sanctions and mob violence, one is compelled to question the sources that authorise these and their right to fix literary and aesthetic criteria for the whole society. Three recent incidents compel us to point this out. One is the attack by certain religious fundamentalist groups on Mohammed Alvi, a Sahitya Akademi award winner and one of the finest poets writing in Urdu today. These critics have taken two of his lines—a harmless and humorous expression of scepticism very common in ordinary speech—out of their poetic context and branded him an atheist,

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while our constitution has nothing against any form of personal belief including atheism and agnosticism so long as one does not take law into one's hands in the name of some belief. The second case is that of Vasant Dattatreya Gurjar, the Marathi poet whose poem on Mahatma Gandhi—a sarcastic poem that upholds Gandhian values against the misuse of his image—written twelve years ago has been reinvented for attack by a fundamentalist organisation in Maharashtra. The third is the case of H.S. Shivaprakash, the well-known Kannada poet and playwright whose play *Mahachaitra* has sparked off unnecessary controversy. The play that won the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi award in 1986, was honoured by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, selected for inclusion in the Popular Books Series by the Karnataka government and has been text book in Mangalore and Mysore Universities, was picked up for attack only recently by a fundamentalist group, when it was prescribed as a text book for Gulbarga and Kuvempu Universities. The play that upholds the message of Basaveswara, the radical 12th century saint-poet of Karnataka, is now discovered to contain certain disparaging remarks about the saint, which are actually remarks made by Basava's enemies in the play. Certain other incidents of his life are also said to have been wrongly represented while our knowledge of the life of Basava is based more on legend than on recorded history. Here is an instance where the protest has gone beyond all norms of democracy and civilisation turning violent and even costing a few lives. Of course, the leading intellectuals and writers of Karnataka including U.R. Anantha Murthy have resented the attitude of the authorities in the matter.

All these cases point to the need on the part of our free-thinking writers and intellectuals for continuous vigilance against anti-democratic and authoritarian forces of all hues that strive to cripple the imaginative freedom of the creative mind. That eternal vigilance is the price of liberty is no cliché. Nothing is more sacred to the writer than the freedom of the spirit and imagination, and nothing more profane than undemocratic attacks on that freedom.

Short Story in Kannada

The accent of this issue of *Indian Literature* is on contemporary Kannada short story. Short story seems to have emerged as a distinct literary genre in Kannada with Masti Venkatesha Iyengar (1891-1986) whose first stories appeared in 1911, and first collection, in 1920. Not that he did not have predecessors like P. Mangesh Rao, M.N. Kamat

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and Kerur Vasudevacharya but none of them had the depth, range and narrative skill of Masti's stories collected in 14 volumes that influenced a whole generation of writers. "The method he adopts", observes B.C. Ramachandra Sharma in his preface to the Penguin collection of Kannada stories, *From Cauvery to Godavari* "is that of a sentient witness who observes life and comments on it while keeping faith in the value system inherited by the whole community." The Navodaya Movement produced a lot of short story writers who chiefly contributed to the enhancement of the thematic dimension of the genre. They included writers from the South like A.R. Krishna Sastri and G.R. Ayyengar and from the North like B. Krishna Sarma and J. Govindarao. The atmosphere of these stories, according to a historian is "charged with ideals, hopes and a humanistic philosophy." The Progressives like A.N. Krishna Rao, Niranjana and 'Chaduranga' looked at reality from below, introduced new themes and contributed to the growth of social awareness. Both these movements had one thing in common: faith in a world of clearly defined values reflected in the logical structure of the story and the neat resolutions of all conflicts. The Navya Movement that began in the 50s marked a real break in terms of vision as well as form. It brought a new complexity to the story; the writer was no more a mere narrator of an event; he was an explorer of experience and of the self as seen in the stories of its best exponents like Ramachandra Sharma, U.R. Anantha Murthy, Shantinath Desai or Yashwant Chittal. Writers like P. Lankesh and Poornachandra Tejaswi however strove to jettison the Navya Movement altogether which they thought had become stale in its pursuit of the alienated individual and mechanical in its employment of technique. These writers however had absorbed the modernist style and vision so deeply that they could not think of going back to the days of Masti or Niranjana. The result was an absolutely new synthesis of a radical understanding of social reality and an innovative narrative strategy. The emergence of the Dalit movement with talented writers from Devanoor Mahadeva to Mogalli Ganesh and the coming of age of women's writing—as in some other languages like Marathi—seem to have been the most exciting developments in Kannada short story in the recent years.

This issue tries to offer no more than some specimens of contemporary short story in Kannada representing different generations and trends. We are deeply indebted to Ramachandra Sharma who made our task easy by collecting the stories as also translating many of them often with help from his wife, Padma Ramachandra Sharma, another excellent translator. □

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TWELVE MODERN KANNADA SHORT STORIES

U.R. Anantha Murthy
Ramachandra Sharma
Poornachandra Tejaswi
Shantinath Desai
P. Lankesh
Yashwant Chittal
Devanoor Mahadeva
Jayant Kaikini
Vaidehi
Mogalli Ganesh
Nataraj Huliyar
Vivek Shanbhag

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KANNADA SHORT STORY TODAY

B.C. Ramachandra Sharma

WE have known story-telling in Kannada for over a thousand years as is evident from *Vaddaradhane*, a tenth century prose work of religious tales. However, the short story as a literary form may be said to have been born in the first two decades of the present century. Masti Venkatesha Iyengar, who is rightly called the Father of the Short Story, used it as a major vehicle to communicate his world-view, though there had been some attempts to usher in the form before. The method he adopted in the one hundred stories he has left behind is that of a sentient witness who observed life and commented on it while keeping faith in the value system inherited by the whole community.

There was a rich crop of short stories during the *Navodaya* period. Looking back, one feels that the writers were influenced more by the poets of that movement than by Masti, the detached realist, and indulged themselves in the romantic excesses which characterized the poetry of the day. The best exemplar of the Masti tradition has been Masti himself with the exception perhaps of Bagalodi Devaraya. The Progressive school of writers, who were very active during the forties, were basically romantic like their predecessors and contributed little to the development of the short story as a literary form in spite of the shift of emphasis they brought to the themes of the stories.

Kannada literature had to wait till the middle of the fifties to make a radical departure from tradition which affected all the forms of literature, including the short story. The *Navya* or the Modern, movement which originated with poetry had a telling effect on the way one ingested and communicated experience. The change that took place was not just a matter of technique, as the opponents of modernism would have us believe, but of vision and the new vision demanded a new mode of expression. It is no coincidence that those who led the

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modern movement through poetry, like the present writer, also wrote the first modern stories.

The *Navya* writers used the form of the short story not just to narrate an experience but to explore it for significance. They employed the tools traditionally associated with poetry like symbols and images to authenticate the experience, however complex it was. Writing a short story was no different from writing a poem. It was both art and craft and the writers of the movement were prepared to exploit all the resources of the language to find full expression for what they wanted to say. It was during this *Navya* period that a great number of memorable stories came to be written.

Did the movement allow itself to be carried away in a spirit of self-indulgence? And was its obsession with a metaphysical type of questioning the very basis of human existence its undoing? The answer to both the questions is perhaps a qualified yes. Lukacs's criticism that the modern novel ends up destroying the distinction between imagined reality and societal reality, that it lessens our awareness of the reality of the world around by ignoring quite a few of its aspects, applies to both the modern Kannada novel and the short story. It is interesting that some of the leading lights of the *Navya* movement felt the need to look into their own creativity during the seventies. The birth of the *Bandaya* movement in the mid-seventies had a lot to do with the self-questioning of the leading writers of the day. A remark by Lankesh—almost an aside—expressing anxiety about our having lost something significant by turning away from society, was converted into a declaration of faith by Poornachandra Tejaswi. He turned his back on the very philosophy underlying the *Navya* movement and plunged into society in a resolute manner for his inspiration. It is to his credit that he has written some of his most significant novels and short stories after his conversion into a new faith.

Though Tejaswi's call to 'jettison the *Navya* movement in its entirety and seek a new direction' and his demand that 'a writer should be seen in his writing only because he is an honest witness to life' seem to want the writers to return to the days and ways of Masti and his brand of realism, the stories that have come from him are unlike the ones that were written during the Masti era. The differences are not only in the thematic content of the stories but also in the use of language and the authenticity of the details which go into the narration. One can clearly see that even Tejaswi has not been able to 'jettison the *Navya* movement in its entirety.'

Society is back in the Kannada short story. The present writer has elsewhere called the phenomenon a Second Coming and with

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good reason. On the surface it does look as if we have gone back to the beginning days when the pioneers of the form looked at society as a launching pad for their creativity. The circle seems to be complete. There is, however, a significant difference which one should not ignore. The narration is no longer unidirectional as it used to be during the *Navodaya* period and if realism is back in the short story, it is no longer the simplistic type which paid scant attention to the evolution of the self within. It is now a realism which takes both man and society into its reckoning, conscious of their interdependence and sees each as an expression of the other. The present writer is sure that a look at the recent stories written by the leading writers of the *Navya* movement like Yashwant Chittal, Anantha Murthy, Shantinath Desai and Lankesh will convince one of the Second Coming of society into the short story.

An aspect of the present day short story in Kannada is the phenomenally expanding universe of experience that characterizes it. Dalits, women and Muslims have come into the field of fiction, having resolved to be heard and this has resulted in enriching the genre. While Devanoora Mahadeva, Mogalli Ganesh and Jahnavi have opened our eyes to the Dalit world, Vaidehi, Nemichandra and Jahnavi have ably presented the world view from the woman's eyes and Boluvaru Mohammed Kumyi, Katpadi Abdul Rasheed and Sara Abubaker have sensitized us to the Muslim world we knew so little about.

Finally, a question which crops up often in the mind of the present writer still interested in creative writing: What does the future hold for us? In spite of some of the exciting things that are happening in Kannada literature, he has a feeling that there is a certain tentativeness in the air and that it is to be seen in the poetry, novel and the short story that are written now. There is a determined attempt on the part of some writers to return to the earlier days and forms in order to find an utterance which reflects the reality of the world we are living in now. Our return, if it materializes at all, can never be to the place and time we left behind long ago. Such a return can only be to a place and time at a higher level which takes into account the complexity of the times.

Every significant birth of a movement in Kannada literature has had its origin initially in poetry. May be, we are waiting for the arrival of a poet of the calibre of either Bendre or Adiga to ring in the change.

What does the future hold for us? Not believing in soothsaying, the present writer would not like to presume to be one himself. □

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AN ENCOUNTER

U.R. Anantha Murthy

SHE had come there to throw herself into the tank but her mind kept wandering. What she had seen when the car slowed down kept recurring: A thatched hut, a box-shaped shop in front, a fat woman in it with a baby on her lap, two bunches of banana hanging and an old man lighting his beedi from the burning tip of a length of coconut fibre.

The green-leafed plant spreading in the waters; the car with its headlights on coming down the hill on the right, now seen and then getting out of sight on the winding road; the bird under the moonlight with its shrill cry—what was its name?—and the cool breeze from the tank. If she stayed on, she would hear and see all those things and the sun would rise again. Not if she killed herself.

There must be a shrub beyond this pungent-smelling one where someone was sitting, she thought. Must be a man who had come there earlier. Or a lady like herself, modern. Would have heard the footsteps had that someone come there after she did. There was the smell of cigarette smoke coming from that spot.

She gathered the hair spread on her back and tied it into a loose knot. Her face would bloat if she died by drowning and the birth mark on her left cheek which everyone admired when she was still a girl would not be visible on the bloated face. Her body would float, face down, and her black hair would spread all over the water. A grazing cow would go on chewing, looking idly like all grazing cattle do. It would not be easy to say whether the body was of a man or a woman ... She had, however put on two black panties, one over the other.

She couldn't recall the precise moment when she had made up her mind. As if it was long long ago or as if it was a process which had gone on for long. Her husband's slap on her cheek wasn't a big thing—a man might hit a woman in love. Go and die, die, die, he had screamed in a bizarre

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voice. Wasn't it a scream that had sprung out of her own inner self? His eyes had the glazed stare of a man out to kill. He had collapsed on to the floor after slapping and his face had blanched as if he were dead. A noise had pounded in her ears. His moustache, arched but bushy eyebrows and thick hair had all seemed ridiculous and a silent sneer had risen and died in her. Their son? He was growing up in a boarding school in Ooty. The boy was fond of his father who was once a tennis champion. He would grow into a man somehow and everything would gradually fade away from his memory.

What were the factors that led them to such an impasse? Who could say who was at fault? Hadn't he loved her earlier? He had married her against his own father's wishes, sold half his property, taken her to the States and enrolled her in a school for acting. Who took the first false step? They had fought over the question a hundred times. One mistake getting entwined with another—they had collaborated on the task for fifteen years. How he laughed uninhibitedly when she wasn't around! Strong and even teeth shining under his black moustache. The women among their acquaintances blamed her and she knew it.

She was amazed that her present hatred could be as clear, pure and wonderful as her love, like a diamond.

She undid her hair and let it spread on her back. Her eyes shone in the moonlight. She was thirty five and had crow's feet under her eyes. He hadn't touched her body for nearly two years, a body which still retained its shape and had a charm of its own because of her feeling of hatred. She had seen it in other men's eyes and had occasionally opened out for them. The pleasure she experienced from such encounters was born of pride and that was what made her husband want to kill her.

The man who sat near the other shrub threw his cigarette stub without putting it out. It must still be giving out smoke in the moonlight. She took out her own packet of cigarettes from her handbag only to realize that she had no matches.

Her hands lay on the lap still like sleeping birds. Would it be allright if she were to ask the man for matches? Suddenly, she felt that her thoughts of dying were irrelevant. The feeling must have been there in her all through, she thought the very next minute. Dazed, she sat still. There was a car going up the hill and the bird called again. The waters of the tank shimmered delicately under the moonlight and she remembered the old man lighting his beedi. She had crushed the leaf of a tree to smell it when she was a little girl, she recalled. Images passed in a parade in front of the eyes leaving

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no feelings behind. Living and dying—both were irrelevant. She was amazed as she thought that her being at any moment rested on her awareness that she was there.

She felt like asking the stranger for matches. But, as her need for a cigarette was not intense, she sat there under the moonlight with her head bent a little, hands on her lap and soft black hair spread on her back. The big toe on her left foot played with a smooth half-buried stone trying to dig it out and judge its shape by going round and round its contour. When it slipped away, the toe on her right foot helped the left one to hold it and scrape away the mud.

A ten year old girl with a pair of short plaits. Red ribbons matching the red of her frock and red shoes. She was surprised that she recalled at that moment the time when she was everyone's favourite child. Everyone pinched her full cheek with its birthmark. Even at that age, she had her own doubts and fears which she could not confide in anyone. How could she be sure she existed? The name she carried—was it really hers? Whatever happened, did it really happen to her? Her wonderment was there, even her obduracy.

She was with her father on the giant wheel. He was in his festive outfit—*dhoti* and silk *jubba*. The latter had been taken out of a case in which was kept a lump of sandalwood. She was as curious as she was afraid, that being her first ride on the giant wheel. It was for her sake that her father had joined her, having willingly dropped all thoughts of his status. As the wheel rose into the air, her fear grew like the multiplication table. She held her father in a desperate hug, convinced that she was dying, as the wheel came down fast tracing a circle. She screamed, asking her father to stop the wheel. He didn't do anything. He, who she had believed could do anything, sat there helpless, probably laughing. He held her close. Her skirt filled out with the air that rushed in and she felt cold in her crotch. Her mother would take her to task if she wetted herself and her father too wouldn't escape his wife's wrath. Probably, it was her effort at not letting herself go that killed her fear.

Why did she have to remember at that moment an incident which even now left her palm clammy? She didn't know and she tried to regain her previous state of void. Her father was old now and his mind so feeble that even to ask whether he still loved her or not was irrelevant. Probably, her son would miss her weekly letters and that was all. There was the packet with a chain of silver anklets on the table—a birthday present for her sister's daughter in Bombay—along with the letters she had to answer. And invitations from the committees on family planning and tree growing and one from the Riders'

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Club. Everything utterly meaningless.

She would ask for the matches. Who could he be and what would he think of a woman who smoked? She walked to him hesitantly.

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He sensed her hesitation and said as he held the light. "I have seen you before. Aren't you the one that goes horse-riding in the morning? I have seen you act in English plays ..."

It was as if he saw nothing unusual in finding a woman alone on the uninhabited tank bund so far from the town. She said thanks and sat next to him as he made place for her. He didn't force her to talk. His silence was not contrived and seemed to be that of a man who could be friends with others without demanding any explanation. She was relieved that he had made it easy for her by recognizing her without going through the formality of introductions. At the same time, she was sorry she had lost her anonymity. She failed to go back to her earlier state of mind and broke the silence.

"It's a small world, isn't it?"

He laughed naturally as if he had known her for long and said nothing. He seemed to have realized that she was in no mood for small talk and she felt it would be easy for her to tell him that she had come there to end her life. She drew on her cigarette thinking it was all the same whether she told him or not. They were both startled when the moonlight bird suddenly let out a shriek and they looked at each other.

"Mrs ..." he started and stopped as if he remembered that she wasn't eager to talk. She realized she wanted him to talk and not sink back to silence from which he wouldn't surface.

"Call me Shailee."

She gathered her thick hair in her hand and let it fall on her shoulder as she waited with a smile on her half-turned face. How many years ago was it that she had sat with her husband and smiled naturally? Her eyes moved uncertainly on his oval face which looked soft in the moonlight.

"Shailee, my wife may be dead at this moment."

He didn't expect her to react to that. Nor was he asking for any sympathy. She was startled and sat there listening to him.

"I was going over what I would say to the police when they come for investigation. Yes, the love of the earlier days was gone. It doesn't matter whose fault it is. Nor is it possible to be certain about it. The fact is that when love goes, the magic that two human beings see in

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each other goes too. That is when this tank, hill and sky die. It may sound funny to you, Shailee—I was startled when the bird cried and so were you. Wasn't it wonderful? When you let down your hair on your shoulder and smiled, I wondered why my wife these days can't smile the way you did. Recently I have even stopped wondering about things. Otherwise, I would probably have the courage to live the life of a painter. I know that my wife wouldn't have stopped me if only I had such courage. When we got married we used to sleep on a small, stone-hard mattress. I was poor but my head was filled with dreams. They have all gone. I don't know how it happened or why. Along with all the shame, jealousy and fear of those days, even the capacity to be happy for no apparent reason too is gone. The more we have, the more she wants. Not that I'm blameless on that count...

"I myself could have killed her today. I have forgotten how it all started. Isn't it terrible? She said she would kill herself. Go ahead, I said, and rudely pushed her away. Go, die, I shouted. She shut herself in the room and I wondered why I felt nothing. She saw me peeping in through a crack in the door to watch her set a chair and fasten a rope to the beam overhead. I may be wrong but I'm sure she was looking at the door. I was worried about what our two children—a boy and a girl—would think when they came from playing with friends. I was surprised that she wasn't worried. I know how fond she is of the children and our home. My world changed when I realized that such a person wanted to kill herself. I must have walked at least for two hours to reach this place. As I walked along, I had the feeling that it wasn't me that was walking.

"Her body must be swinging now and the children crying. The police must be noting down things. There must be a huge crowd of people from our area in front of the house. I somehow feel that all these things are happening to someone else, not me ...

"Listen to our story before marriage. She was eighteen. I went to her village and stayed there for four days. Theirs was the only house in the forest. All round a rubber plantation and hills in front and at the back. We used to gather firewood together. She would draw water from the well, chop vegetables, wash clothes and jump up and down while hanging the wet clothes to dry. Everything she did was a part of a dance. We laughed for no reason at all. She would tell her mother about the dishes that I didn't like and attend to my bath water. She would come in while I was bathing without letting her mother catch her and rub my back. When I got up in the night to urinate, she would cough to say that she too was awake. She would ask me to go with her to the cattle shed because it was dark and would stand there

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with her body touching mine ... That girl couldn't have been the same one as my wife, I feel.

"She had a grandfather who had levelled the forest to grow rubber. Everyone talked about him though he had been dead for five years. He was known to be randy and was an expert in writing love letters. He wrote such letters till his dying day and kept a copy of every such letter he wrote. Letters full of four-letter words and vivid descriptions of what they did when they met with an invitation for a repeat performance. The style of the letters changed as the lover's nature changed and there were even letters replete with heart, butterfly and celestial damsels robed in white.

"She would go up the attic with me, take out the letters from an old box and we would laugh while reading them. She had a grandmother—the real wife of the old man—who kept an eye on us and was curious about us. Once she came upon us reading the letters and showed us with great pride the marks her husband's branding had left on her back. I remember our laughing when she told us with great zest how she had eventually tamed her man, having stood for years his randiness, obduracy and his interest in sorcery. Shailee, I don't know why your face makes me recall all these things. My wife isn't like you. Her home is her universe. Once she used to sing well. She has of late given it up.

"There was a goat in their place. It used to eat everything, even the leash made of coconut fibre. Once it ate up my underwear that she had washed. I remember her holding her sides and laughing. She laughed some more when she saw my serious-looking face. I too laughed not knowing why. A small thing, I know. We must have laughed for two or three years every time we remembered the incident.

"She doesn't even know that I can sit with you like this and think and talk the way I have done. With the ever growing rage within me, even I didn't know till now, till I met you."

Having talked for long, he stopped.

She sat quietly and placed her hand on his. She had got her wonderment back. Some damp and transparent clouds passed across the moon's face and a breeze blew.

"Come, let's go," she said. He followed her to the car. She asked for his address, picked up the whisky flask on the rear seat and asked him if he cared for a drink. He took a swig and offered the flask to her. She put the lid on, placed it beside her and said, "Have some more if you like." Starting the car, she said. "I don't think your wife will have killed herself."

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"Nothing will have changed either," he said softly. Thinking about things, she wanted to say to herself, "Probably not," but desisted when she saw his lips tightly pressed to form a line on his gentle oval face. She brought the car to a halt in front of his house. They could see his son peacefully doing his homework. He pressed her hand.

She pressed his hand and said, 'Goodbye.'

Translated by Ramachandra Sharma



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THE PARTY

Ramachandra Sharma

THE light that flooded the half-acre garden in front of the bungalow was so dazzling that the skink which scurried through the grass blades turned into a snake-bodied flash of lightning. The workers of Jalandhar Electricity Board had toiled all day—though it was a Sunday—to convert night into day, though their chief, Sitaram, had not asked for any help. The night beyond the garden, though under a full moon, looked pitchblack. Coloured bulbs twinkled all along the distant fence like glow-worms and the spotlights on the trees focused on the table in the centre of the lawn.

Indeed, the bungalow, some ten kilometers away from the town and its bustle, was a haven of peace but with no hope of a response if a cry for help went out. Sitaram's immediate neighbour was Kedar Singh, Jalandhar's D.G.P., and his residence was a furlong away. Lalithamma was naturally anxious when they moved in. She recalled the contented lives they led in Madhya Pradesh before Sitaram opted for this job and decided that men all over the world were the same, utterly self-centred, for ever thinking of their careers and promotions, with no thought for their wives' needs. She was distressed that her husband had come to Jalandhar though the disturbed state of Punjab and Haryana was common knowledge. There were reports every morning of terrorists materialising from nowhere to massacre the innocents. She lost her initial anxiety as time passed, thanks to the presence of a couple of armed Sikh constables at the gate. She had won them over by personally supervising the supply of food and beverages. She had landed a job in Jalandhar not long after they moved in and that had left her little time to nurse her anxiety. She warmed up to Kedar Singh's wife when it was discovered over an evening's drinks that Kedar Singh and Sitaram had attended the same college in Delhi ... The headlines which screamed from the front pages of newspapers about death and mutilation had taken to mere sighing and Lalithamma's eyes would skip the details to linger over the

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juicy bits about the latest scandals surrounding either the Chief Minister of the state or the Ministers at the centre.

She had every reason for her excitement that evening. It was the thirteenth birthday of their only child, Kusuma, who attended the convent school in Jalandhar where she herself taught English. The girl was known to be clever and quite popular among her classmates and that had pleased her. It was, of course, true that she had occasionally felt twinges of jealousy as she noticed how close the girl was to her father. She wasn't unduly worked up about it knowing that it was only a passing phase. Her study of English Literature at the Central college and her knowledge of Freud and the Greek Tragedies had convinced her that it was only natural that a girl, while waiting to grow up, idolizes her father who stands before her like a giant, the very embodiment of all authority. She had consoled herself saying that the same girl once she grew up, would come close to the mother. The very process of tempering of both body and mind that went with growing up would ensure such a closeness to the mother, the manifested form of the ultimate in love. She had succeeded in interesting her daughter in gardening, which was as dear to herself as literature. The previous tenant must have left the place a year ago—it was more a forest than a garden. It had taken both effort and time to level the area, trim the fence, lay the carpet-like lawn and grow her favourite flower plants, geranium, ixora, jasmine and roses. The summer vacation had started when they moved in and she had had to wait for a few weeks even after the new term in school commenced before she got the job. There were obvious signs that Kusuma had started inching towards her mother and that had pleased her no end.

She remembered being upset by an incident which took place soon after the flowers had started smiling and wondered why she had to think of it at this festive hour. She shook her head to drive the memories away but they swarmed over her face like a couple of persistent flies ... She had stretched herself after lunch in the bedroom with a Kannada novel in hand. She had registered, but only vaguely, the voices of some boys talking somewhere beyond the garden but had not got up to investigate. She had dozed off—perhaps the novel was uninteresting. It was a disturbed sleep with intriguing dreams which challenged the basic tenets of logic. A river in full flow, its water changing colour from blood-red to earth's brown; Kusuma, happily floating on her back, letting out a scream as she was sucked in by the swirling water; water suddenly drained out leaving a vast plain behind and Kusuma lying on her back, sobbing, looking like a

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foetus which had lost its place in the womb's waters ... While Lalithamma, knowing that there was a fundamental and qualitative difference between dreams of the night and those of the noon, was still trying to make some sense of the images she had seen, when she was startled awake by a sound. She shot up and rushed to the window as the noise reminded her of the soft swishing noise of meat being chopped in a butcher's shop. Her dream-garden, her poem, was being devoured by a flock of sheep and goats. Most of the flower plants along the edges of the fence were in tatters and the perfectly levelled lawn had a few gashing wounds to show. She closed her eyes and shook her head, not wanting to see the damage, not wanting to believe what her eyes would see. A goat bleated as she threw the front door open and raced to the gate. There was a group of shepherd-boys sitting in front of the bungalow. Her broken Punjabi gave way as she raged and she was confused when she realized that she had unwittingly lapsed into Kannada. She took hold of herself and calmly questioned the boys in Hindi though underneath her even tone was a volcano ready to erupt.

The boys didn't move or say anything. They lifted their faces to look at her once and then ignored her. They busied themselves raking with their sticks the sand in the centre of the circle they had formed as they sat. Lalithamma felt lost for a second. Recovering herself, she chased the sheep and goats around till they ran out of the gate. Their helter and skelter run had razed a few more of her flower plants. Soon after, the boys had got up and disappeared with the animals. Young faces with no growth on the chin or the upper lip.

Even as she stood there shocked, she must have seen the fence looking like a mouth which had lost a few of its front teeth and thought that it had been a wilful act.

Kusuma was heartbroken and Sitaram did his best to console her. A phone call had brought Kedar Singh and his wife. The men had huddled together drinking whisky and walked around the garden discussing strategies to protect the property while Lalithamma sobbed over the shoulders of Singh's wife.

A police constable had been posted the very next day to man the gate. He would stay on duty till Sitaram came home. Within a couple of months the garden had recovered and there was a smile on Lalithamma's face as the flowers flaunted once again their colours in the sun.

There had been no significant change in the Punjab situation. Reports of violent killings were routine and there was no new initiative from the government. The anger in the hearts of the Sikhs after the

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Blue Star operation was a festering wound. In spite of the mounting evidence of late that Hindus were the targets of the militants, Lalithamma and Sitaram weren't particularly worried. They really seemed to believe that lightning is what strikes the neighbouring village, not their own.

A loving daughter who seemed to be drawing close, a husband whom his colleagues loved and respected and a friend like Kedar Singh ... Lalithamma seemed to want nothing more in life when ...

Was it the same gang of boys with their childlike faces? She didn't know. It happened one night, three months after the previous incident. Not at the dead of night but half an hour after the constable had come into the house to say goodnight before going home.

Lalithamma had screamed as she noticed the leaping flames from the living room window. Kusuma had come out of her room and Sitaram had dashed out of the bathroom. The whole length of the fence was on fire. Lalithamma had stopped Sitaram from rushing out and rang the residence of Kedar Singh. By the time the D.G.P. who wasn't at home that evening came from Jalandhar with a posse of policemen, the fence had been reduced to ashes. So were a few saplings and the leaves on the tall trees had turned black.

Was it an accident or was it arson? As the matter was being hotly debated, one of the men who had fanned out in different directions came back with an empty tin of kerosene. Kedar Singh was among those that didn't attach much significance to the find and so no further investigation was undertaken .... The only change was the replacement of the hapless constable by a couple of armed men from the Reserve Police who would man the place round the clock.

The fence turned green once again but there was no answer to Lalithamma's nagging question: Had there been a sprout of hair, however thin, on the innocent faces of the shepherd-boys during the three months between the two incidents?

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The party was in full swing. As it was unthinkable for Kusuma's friends to come to the party on their own, the invitation had included the parents too. Ten out of the dozen girls who had been asked had come and the other two had phoned to say that they were waiting for their fathers to return from work. The presents laid out on the centre table dazzled under the bright lights. Some of the ladies had gin and lime cordial and their giggles were loud enough to smother the men's arguments. Kusuma and her friends were dancing away

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on the floor of the living room in sweet abandon to the beat of the pop songs from the tape recorder.

Kedar Singh must have winked his consent—the bearer generously supplied the security guards with rum, not in glasses but in stainless tumblers. The world outside the gate was forgotten as they turned their attention to the happenings on the garden. Their guns wobbled like walking sticks in the hands of old men out on their morning walk.

Some of the guests from Jalandhar had left and the girls had come out into the garden. Laughter rose like cigarette smoke into the night air to dissipate itself.

It was at that moment that ...

There was a burst as if a string of crackers had been set alight. It took a few seconds before the sound passed through the alcoholic haze which hovered over the place and registered itself in the minds of those present. It was only when one of Kusuma's friends screamed and fell in a heap on the lawn, that one realized that it wasn't a cracker that had burst. A bullet had only grazed the girl's arm but the blood which flowed out the flesh wound looked unusually red on the green green grass.

One can only imagine the confusion of the next hour. An ambulance raced in, its bells ringing, accompanied by a couple of police jeeps from which armed men jumped out even before they had stopped. The screams of the girls rent the air as their parents vainly tried to comfort them. Nobody paid any attention to the twelve-year old daughter of the gardener who said that she had distinctly heard a few boys guffawing from the wheat field beyond seconds after the shots. Lalithamma went into the house with her daughter not wanting either to confirm or contradict everyone's conviction that it was the handiwork of the Khalistanis. She sat on the bed holding her daughter tight as the girl shook uncontrollably.

Memories of the previous two incidents rushed into her and her eyes went black. She pressed them with her hands as she felt that they had started frantically going round the room looking for the source of the fear within her.

The girl had sobbed herself to sleep and Lalithamma gently eased her body on to the bed. When she switched on the bedlight, closed the door and came out, there was no one in the living room. The guests had quietly left after mumbling their distress at the turn of events that evening. Kedar Singh was in the garden conferring with some of his officers. Sitaram, who stood for a while on the fringe of the group, must have felt that his presence there was not necessary.

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Or, he might have felt like going in to comfort his wife and daughter.

He found his wife standing all alone in the living room like an orphan. He threw his arms round her shoulders in a protective gesture and led her to a settee. He sat down beside her and said nothing as he knew that her grief was beyond tears. It was a grief which had its source in her fear of not being able to comprehend what was happening around her.

Remembering that his wife loved music, he switched on the radio. A girl's voice, plaintive like veena strings when plucked under water was singing a popular song.

> Why is there this sparkle in your eyes
> when an elephant has trampled on my dreams?
> And this smile on your handsome face
> when tear-stains have dried on my cheeks?

Lalithamma was about to let herself go and cry, when there was the sound of a door opening and they had looked up.

Kusuma stood there, face drained of all colour, her eyes opened wide in terror, trembling as if it was a freezing December night. Lalithamma rushed to her.

The girl's green party frock was patterned here and there with patches of blood, reminding one of her friend who had been shot. □

Translated by the Author

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THE GOLDEN DREAM

Poornachandra Tejaswi

"IT is perhaps a law of Providence that certain ailments should visit everyone at certain points in their lives. I am saying this because, seeing Ramesha's strange condition, people said, 'Ayyo, he was all right till recently' ..."

People of Hatthur are a somewhat detached lot. They seem to have transcended desire, anger, pride, jealousy and all the rest of the vices. It is a matter of great wonder that they yet manage to have children. And they all thought Ramesha had turned rather strange of late.

"In the bus stand, he either stands rooted or sits glued for hours! What strange disease has seized him?"

"It's the school which has spoilt him. Who knows which dirty bitch has cast a magic spell on him?"

"Come on, he hasn't sprouted a moustache yet, and you say he is already mad after girls. Really, you should talk more sensibly."

"O' my Lord, don't say that. You don't know about the boys of these days. They see films and all that, you see. They don't wait to come of age or anything else."

"Anyway, you better shut up. What if your words reach his mother's ears! A son is all that the poor thing has." People spoke in a hundred different ways.

Ramesha didn't have a father. His mother had brought him up all by herself. She had some four or six acres of land in Hatthur. Since Hatthur was surrounded by thick jungles and flanked by two streams on its right and left, it did not have a government road. Though people had lived there for generations, the village had not even been marked on the government map. People of the village paid no tax or levy. The government would not sanction even a paltry coin to the village in its budget. No one went to the village even to ask for votes. No politics was possible in that village of just three or four houses.

If one got off the bus on the Mangalore Highway, and climbed up

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and down the hill range on its right, somewhere beyond was Ramesha's village, Hatthur. Perhaps, the village got its name because one had to go up the hilltops to reach there.*

There were thick jungles for miles on both sides of this highway. But for a few vehicles that occasionally plied on the road, not a single soul could be seen on that road. Ramesha had to wait there for his bus every day to reach his school which was far away.

Situated somewhere along the deserted road, with forests that stood on both sides like walls, it was impossible to tell that the place where Ramesha waited was actually a bus stand. A board nailed to a tall tree that read "Mandal Panchayat Bus Stand" had rusted and curled up. Only those who noticed the bylane running from the top of the hill to the foot of the trees beside the road could guess that it was a bus stand. Usually none of the buses stopped there. If any passenger got off the bus on that road, the other pilgrim-passengers from the plains, on their way to Dharmasthala, would give him terrified looks, as though he were a wild animal, and whispered amongst themselves. Only a couple of shuttle buses that went round all villages were largehearted enough to stop when somebody waved to them.

It was a strange bus stop! People with weak hearts would never dare alone in that silent, forsaken place and wait for anything even for ten minutes. The clouds that came floating from the direction of the sea first encountered the peaks of the hills around Hatthur. They dashed against them, reeled round and round and sank down to the valley of Hatthur. So, it was always cloudy and foggy along the highway. Buses and cars that travelled through this thick fog had to inch ahead, stumbling and groping with headlights on even in the daytime.

If any traveller got tired of waiting for the bus and tried to flag down a private vehicle passing by, the driver, already suspicious and apprehensive in that wilderness, would speed off into the thick fog without even looking back, as though he had spotted some Chambal valley dacoits.

In fact, people say many crimes have indeed taken place on this road. Smugglers from the coast, local smugglers who carry sandalwood to Kerala and such others use this road. There is a river flowing down the valley, some distance to the left of the road. Anyone who tries to catch them can be finished off and thrown into the river. It is even said that murderers, who found it a suitable place to dispose off the bodies, brought them there in cars and threw them down the steep cliff. Recently, the military people had searched the valley for

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* 'Hathu' is 'to climb.'

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a helicopter which had suddenly disappeared after taking off from Bangalore. It is said that they had found several bones and skeletons at the bottom of the cliff.

Once when Ramesha was waiting for the bus, he heard someone talking behind him. He turned back and saw some strange looking people with red moustaches and hair, wearing turbans, coming down the Hatthur road. They had with them donkeys carrying loads on their backs. Those Hindi speaking people must have been wandering tribals. They sat near the rock on the other side of the road and talked for sometime. Later, they got up one by one, took their loads and left very reluctantly with their donkeys. People who came down the hill in a group were now walking dispersed each a furlong from the other.

Ramesha was surprised. Where did they come from? He had never seen them in his village. In such a small village, nobody could have missed those people who talked in such a strange language and looked and dressed so strangely. Then, where did they come from? They had come down the same path which he had taken! Which other mysterious place did that path lead to? As far as he knew, the road which did not fork out anywhere, led only to Hatthur.

Ramesha did not understand. He started at the huge boulder on the other side of the road in silence. When the fog cleared a bit, he could see that a couple of dogs and a few people were still around. Ramesha was not scared as was natural for anybody from Hatthur People with weak hearts were never born there. If they did, they didn't survive.

A woman, who was standing near the rock, came straight towards Ramesha. Why was she still there when all her people had left, he wondered. Maybe, she had gone to the river to relieve herself, he thought. She stared at him for a long time and asked him a lot of nonsensical questions in her unintelligible Hindi. Ramesha only blinked at her. Whatever got into her, seeing Ramesha standing alone in that deserted place, she started telling him through gestures that she would remove wax from his ears. Ramesha refused impatiently, moving his head. Then, despite all his protests, she insisted on telling his fortune, took his hand and told him a lot of things in her language. Ramesha could not make out anything. She took out an oil bottle from her bag and said she would massage his head. Ramesha, who did not have any money with him except the bus charge, showed his empty pocket to her. But she poured the oil, which had a strange fragrance on his head and started massaging. She touched him all over under the pretext of massaging. When she rubbed hard, shaking

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him up, he wondered if it was all a dream or the reality. Completely at a loss as to how he should face the situation, amidst the smell of oil and the rubbing of his head, he wondered what he should do.

Just then, he heard the bus approaching. Ramesha waved at the bus and it stopped some distance away. He ran and got into it. The strange woman stood there with her two mongrels, a bag slung across her shoulder.

This incident did not have any special significance in Ramesha's life. It was not the cause of his strange behaviour either. As the fragrance of the oil slowly evaporated into the air leaving not trace, the incident too was forgotten. Contrary to the suspicions of the people of Hatthur, Ramesha's strange behaviour was not the result of a spell cast by some girl in his class either. Then, was the magical ambience of the bus-stand the reason?

One day, Ramesha, who was quite bored of waiting in the shade of the huge trees, wondering if the bus would stop at all, started staring at the boulder on the other side of the road. He suddenly asked himself why it couldn't be the back of an elephant. As he stared at the rock, letting his imagination run riot, a hidden faculty of his mind gradually came alive. Once he learnt the method of rejecting the cause and effect relationship of the physical world, the boulder opposite slowly started breathing and he could see it heaving. In the fog-enveloped magical world, the trees started dancing to the tune of Ramesha's imagination, as if they were made of rubber. Like a ring master, he conducted their dancing.

Just then, he heard the sound of the bus. He hurriedly bid goodbye to his dreams and got ready to stop the bus.

The bus didn't come. It was the sound of an Ambassador car. Sometimes, people from the valley got tired of waiting for the bus and took a taxi. If other people waved, they would stop and take them along. Though it cost ten paisa more than the bus fare, it was better than waiting for the bus. But when Ramesha signalled for the taxi to stop, it sped away. The taxi had dark windowpanes and he couldn't even see if there were people inside. As the car turned at the bend, Ramesha, who had heard that smugglers always had their car windows painted black, thought its dicky must be full of gold biscuits.

Within minutes of Ramesha's mastering this new art of dreaming, he got into very knotty problems. It was true that another car came chasing the car he had tried to stop. To escape from the chasing car, people in the first car threw sacks of gold biscuits in the direction of the river. Some sacks missed the river and fell on the bank. And

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then, a sack of gold biscuits was in Ramesha's hands.

Okay, so he had the biscuits. But what was he to do with them? What were those glittering gold biscuits worth? To whom could he sell them? Wouldn't the police or the smugglers come after him if they got the slightest hint? What if he took them home to get some jewellery made for his mother? Which goldsmith should he approach? What if that goldsmith were to tell the police?

One thing he could do would be to tell the goldsmith the whole story, offer him a share in the gold and ask him not to tell anyone. But would the goldsmith believe him? After coming to know that it was smuggled gold that Ramesha had found by the road, would he not say Ramesha never gave him any gold? It was a big nuisance. If the poor get gold, it means trouble.

Lost in the troubles in his dream, he simply didn't realise that the bus had come, had stopped and someone had got down from it and walked away somewhere. Ramesha decided that he would first pay attention to what was important and he could decide on what was illusory and what was real later. One of his acquaintances in the bus saw him staring into space and assumed he was waiting for a different bus and kept quiet. The bus went away.

Ramesha waited for the bus. Why was the bus so late today? These damned shuttle buses sometimes didn't turn up at all, he thought.

And again, the boulder that stood like the cursed Ahalya! Whispered chants of Rama emanating from the rock! Ahalya who was freed of the curse and came out breaking the rock! But Ahalya resembled one of his classmates ... No was she not the strange woman who had given him an oil massage? In the enveloping fog, all the rocks on the distant hill looked like cursed women.

Ramesha didn't get another bus till evening. People of the village, who had taken the same bus, wondered how he could have missed the bus.

"Isn't that how people gradually go mad!" thought Ramesha on his way to the bus stop, and felt frightened. He quite succeeded in remaining a normal boy while he was in the village. But as he neared the bus stop, its seclusion, the encompassing fog and that sparkling wet boulder, he would have a relapse of his everyday-ailment. Precious stones washed ashore by the waves! Divine damsels bathing in the flowing river! The sparkling chariot of the god on the clouds that wandered in the valley before it came down. Trees that made hands of their branches and ruffled the hair of their neighbour-trees! Trees

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that smiled, wearing green sweaters of moss! And birds that spoke so clearly!

It was becoming difficult for Ramesha to catch his bus. Some strange beggar woman rubbing his head had turned out quite like Allauddin rubbing the magic lamp!

"This boy is ruined. He should be taken out of school and made to work in the fields," people of Hatthur grumbled.

"Ayyo! Look at my son's fate!" moaned his mother. Very often, she went with him to the bus stop and put him into the bus herself.

"Doesn't he have that much sense? It occurs to him all right to eat and drink! It occurs to him to do everything but get into the bus and go to school. What's happened to him? Who will read his stars and tell me what's happened to him?" She shared her grief with whoever said Ramesha was under a spell.

Ramesha hadn't really gone so insane as not to see the difference between dreams and reality. But to him, both dreams and reality had begun to seem like one single activity of the mind. Don't we sow seeds, transplant paddy seedlings and water them in anticipation of the golden dreams of tomorrow? Aren't dreams and reality always woven tight together like creepers in the forest?

Why yet did the people of Hatthur grumble? Had it bothered them in any way? Mother specially acted as if he was ill!

Ramesha tried to forget his newly-mastered art. However much he tried, as soon as he reached the bus stand, the magic world of his mind drew him again to the dream-world. As he stared at the boulder opposite, he felt pulled to it like a drunkard to a bar. Couldn't the damned bus come immediately? It never did. While he rolled in his gem-studded dreams, it came and went off in a flash. Even the bus was a dream. One dream did not have the patience to wait for the other dream to end!

Ramesha tried waiting in a different bus stop. But none of the buses stopped there. As time went by, he desperately prayed, "God! make my mind like it was before." He felt as if the dreams had lodged themselves in his head and were oppressing him, as if he had become a bonded labourer, a slave to the boulder opposite, the huge trees around and the descending clouds.

If things had gone on like this, he perhaps would have gone mad! Once, when he stood in the bus stop, the boulder opposite clapped. Surprised, Ramesha went near it and listened intently, wondering which cursed woman would emerge out of it. And he heard the claps again from inside the boulder! As he watched, the boulder

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that looked like the back of an elephant cracked. On top of the boulder, right at the start of the crack, was a banyan plant. Who knows which bird's dropping had planted the banyan seed there? By some magic, it had sunk its roots into the rock and had even sprouted a few leaves. The boulder, which couldn't be shaken even by explosives, had suddenly cracked under the pressure of roots as thin as hair. Its leaves, which played in the wind, looked at Ramesha and rolled with laughter.

It would be crazy to connect this incident to Ramesha getting all right again. But, after this, Ramesha missed his bus less often. □

Translated by Bageshri



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THE MEDIATORS

Shantinath Desai

YOU know, I am not the one to get involved in such business. No, never. I have never fancied the idea of catching hold of a male and a female and herd them in the shed called marriage—I have never done that sort of thing. But my wife is a great one for doing it. She has boundless enthusiasm for and keen interest in promoting matrimony. However, fortunately, our own marriage was achieved without any mediators, thank God! She was my student in the college, and there wasn't any significant difference in our subcastes. And her father entertained unusual respect and regard for teachers! Our love grew gradually. I had asked her the usual question, "Rohini, will you take me as your etc." Only after I had done enough romancing and only after the God of Love Manmatha had urged us, "Children, enough of your playing. Now be serious and fulfil Brahma's command to marry and multiply and of course, also let me rest for a while!" I don't know what happened to her, she suddenly fell at my feet. I lifted her and embraced her. The story ran smoothly from then on. And without any director or producer. You see, we had succeeded in herding ourselves in our own dark shed and begun to chew our days and nights! Yes I managed my own marriage, true, but it has been never my line to arrange other people's marriages. I never put my heart into such enterprise. Perhaps I—a history professor—could see too easily and clearly the deficiencies and warts of other individuals. I was perpetually assailed by such doubts as "How can this poor chap live with her for life or if this girl set up family with him, poor chap, his life will be a ruin, most certainly, etc." My tongue refused to praise him in her presence or praise her in his presence, and then give the green signal to them to start their bullock-cart of matrimony! My wife is at the other pole from me in this matter. Subject to clearance on such items as caste, cultural level, educational qualification and age, she was convinced that any male can mate successfully with any female! She was sure they would make a go of their married life! Nothing would

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give her greater joy than bringing off a successful matrimonial relationship between a male and a female, even if this involved saying anything to promote the cause, or saying as much as necessary or concealing negative points or exaggerating positive ones. She usually rounded off her successful match-making with the optimistic note, "Well, they will somehow make adjustments later. Poor people, remember there is always a mediator between them called sex!" Then she would laugh the matter away!

You see, the story I am about to narrate to you, concerns my colleague, Doctor S. Nirmala. She had a sharp intellect and was inclined to be over-logical and extreme in her arguments. Most recently she had become a bit of feminist. She was a teacher who propagated such ideas as that women should have equal rights with men, that women should take initiative and get the education of their own choice, and that women should choose their own husbands and carve out their own future. She held strongly the view that the husband should respect the independence and individuality of the wife, and women strive hard to see that their perspectives changed in such radical directions. Her father had been the first Vice-Chancellor of our University, and after retirement he had settled in Bangalore. It was he who fixed his daughter's doctoral studies at Toronto University. As soon as she returned from abroad she was appointed as a Lecturer in our department, thanks to him. Currently she was a Reader in the department like me. Given all this background she remained unmarried, and there seemed to be no hopeful signs that she would marry. And she was past forty and naturally the very desire for marriage had dried up in her heart. Most of us felt bad about it—a cultured, educated woman with an independent income of her own, shrivelling up without marriage and motherhood. Mock-seriously we would propose to her names of eligible grooms from time to time. She would catch the spirit of the proposals and laugh them away. She would rationalise her personal predicament, saying "Well, in our society today, under the changing conditions, it is inevitable that many women will have to remain single like me!" Rohini, my wife had more sympathy for Nirmala than I. When most of us praised Nirmala's scholarship and intellectual brilliance as demonstrated in her learned publications and her lectures, Rohini stuck to her refrain, "All right, all that is fine, but how nice if she had a husband and a child!"

While this was the state of affairs, one fine day we received, as if out of the blue, a letter from America from Doctor Govind Deshpande. Govind had been my class-fellow from the Gokhale High

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School to Gokhale college. Later he moved on to Bombay School of Economics from where he took his M.A., and Ph.D., and followed this up with a Fulbright Scholarship to the US., where he had eventually settled down. Whenever he wrote to me, he would invite me to shift to the States of join Pennsylvania University. He had taken another Ph.D., there in International Law and was teaching there. It seems that when he was forty he had visited India in the holidays and had brought his American wife with him. That was what I had heard. All that time in his enthusiasm to show India to his foreign wife he seems to have had no time for friends like me. Some five or six years later I got the news that he had divorced his wife. During the divorce proceedings in the Court he had been mentally so upset by his wife's allegations such as that he was physically defective and that he had lapsed into insanity. It was from then on that he had cut himself off from all connections with friends and relatives, and embarked on a life of anonymity. That was why he had not visited India even when his father died. In fact, in our town Govind had ceased to be a topic of any local talk or gossip. In his recent letter he had said that he would spend three months in India and was anxious to resume his old contacts and relationships. In May there was a letter in which he had spelled out in detail his travel programme—date of arrival, airlines, flight number, his programme of stay in different places. Within a week of his letter, I had a letter from his sister, stating, "Govind is visiting India after a long gap of time. I am sure you are aware of the hell he had experienced there. He is now trying to restructure his life and become a changed man. Now he needs badly the support of close friends like you. So come down to the town. You must stay with us ..." Right from the early days, Govind's sister Radhakka was close to us. She had been looking after her younger brother with maternal solicitude. During examination time, she would lie to us that Govind was not home and thus send us away! While admitting him to the college, she had personally taken care of the procedure and met the Principal in that connection. We used to joke about it, saying, "Oh, Govind, you are very lucky. How nice it would have been if we, too, had an elder sister like yours! She would have even fixed a girl-friend for us!" We used to refer jocularly to his sister as the sole cause of his several achievements—when he stood first in the class, when he bagged prizes in debating competition or essay competition. She had a B.A., in Sanskrit and later married an engineer. After her husband's death due to cancer, she returned to the home town to live with her mother. As soon as I got her letter, my immediate reaction was that if Radhakka could go to states to live

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with her brother and look after him, his life would run smoothly. I had said as much to Rohini. "To Govind his elder sister means everything. If he can persuade her to live with him, all his problems will be solved. A smart girl, that one. Must be around fifty now. She was four years senior to us." Then Rohini calculated, "That means Govind must be now 45 or 46. An ideal case for re-marriage!" I replied laughingly "Look, how come your first thoughts about anybody relate to marriage! Have you taken exclusive agency from Brahma to arrange marriages?"

★ ★ ★

I have helped you make some acquaintance with the key characters in my story. Now I have to tell you one or two things about what happened after Govind's arrival in India. Well, in the first place, the information that Govind was to visit India brewed a scheme in Rohini's head!

She queried, "Look, you say that Govind is coming to India. What is wrong if we think about Nirmala in this connection? Why don't you sound her a little before leaving for your town?"

I was enraged and screamed at her incoherently, "Nonsense! What do you take Nirmala to be? Do you take her for a woman hungry and waiting for a man? Now she is a sexless creature with a strongly entrenched philosophy of her own! She has now crossed boundaries of things like a marriage proposal. Any talk relating to marriage now strikes her invariably as an attempt to joke or to insult! In any case I do not want to get mixed up with the matrimonial affairs or such dubious matters concerning a person like her. Look here, what do you take me to be? Do you think I am a middleman or a marriage broker? Do you know the right word for interference in the relation between a man and a woman? Well, those who indulge in it are called pimps! In Kannada they call him a *Kuntaliga*, a go-between! Damn it, I cannot do this brokerage business, I am telling you once for all!"

Rohini pulled a long face. She answered mildly and defensively, "All right, I won't talk about it. Why are you kicking up such a shindy? I was just making a small suggestion—I thought there was here a golden opportunity to do some good to a good woman—and your raving and ranting, what do they call it?"

Considerably cooled down, I said, "Every person knows what is his or her own good. Nirmala is no longer a young girl. She is capable of giving her life the direction and form she desires. And, mind you,

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she has enough resources and advantages in doing so. It is best that we shut up and sit still ..."

It was not like Rohini to accept my words without challenging. She began "Well, yes all that is true, all the same ..." She was not the one to miss a chance to play the middleman role. So she concluded, "such an opportunity, such a tailor-made chance is not a daily occurrence!"

I answered somewhat sarcastically, "Yes, what you say is also true. But, suppose someone were to go up to her and ask her, 'Such and such a groom-to-be is around, what do you say?! She would lash at her, 'Look here, have you gone mad? Have you no business of your own? If you have no work, please register your name with an Employment Exchange!' That is the kind of woman she happens to be!"

Rohini was impossible. She took me up literally on the issue, saying, "Well, then, shall I approach her?"

Confronting Rohini's stupidity, I, too seemed to have succumbed to stupidity! I ranted again, "Look here, Rohini. I am warning you early enough—you should not dip your hands into such matters, absolutely, and most certainly where my own colleagues are concerned."

Rohini answered in a tone that combined sarcasm and boredom "All right. Let it be, as you say. Why do you scream like this? Everybody has his or her fate to propel them from behind. Why should I worry myself so much?"

Rohini's silence suggested the tranquility of depth. I sat before her helplessly spreading my hands.

★ ★ ★

Any how I did go to my town towards the close of May. Depositing my suitcase in my uncle Madhukar's house and telling them not to expect me for a dinner that night, I went to Govind's house. Govind's house was known as Deshpande Wade or residential complex. It was such an enclosed system that once you are inside it, you have no contact with the outside world! Those on the ground floor will have absolutely no idea of the goings on in the upper floors. Well, I need not go into a detailed account of the place here, and it is not to my purpose anyway. Well, for me the most significant matter of interest then was that when we were young, as soon as I shouted 'Eh, Govind' he would rush to me no matter in which corner of the sprawling, vast structure he might then happen to be. Now I could see him nowhere on the site. The first person to come out now was his elder

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sister Radhakka. When I saw her widow's face I felt a sharp stab, but I didn't know how to ask her anything about her or to show my sympathy in some way. Radhakka immediately gave a laugh, and asked, "When did you arrive, Arjun?" That put me at ease. After preliminary exchanges about mutual welfare etc., I asked her, "Isn't Govind at home?"

She replied, "He is taking bath. He will be with you soon." I had a suspicion that she must have pushed him into the bath-room after my arrival!

Curious, I asked, "Has Govind changed a lot?"

She, "Of course. How could he remain unchanged? He was generally very fair, but now he looks fairer and redder."

I, "How about his way of speaking etc.,?"

She, "Well, he has an American accent. His Kannada is somewhat faltering. After all, he has been away so long." Her tone was a mixture of regret and admiration.

I, "What about his health and things like that?"

She, "Look here, that wretch of a white wife tortured him no end, it seems and the divorce etc must have created a lot of tension. He has thinned a bit, sure. He smokes much to much."

I, "Well, before he returns, hammer him into shape. By the way, why don't you go back with him?"

She, "Well, we should have visited the States when my husband was alive. That wretched cancer came in the way. Now it is out of the question to leave mother alone in this house and go with him. If you ask me, it would be best for Govind himself, to return to India for good. But he says that he now feels most at home there."

I asked the very question I did not really want to ask, "In that case, wouldn't it be a good idea for him to marry here before leaving?"

Apparently I had introduced the theme after her heart. She cast a conspiratorial look around, but, happy at what I had said, she went towards the door, closed it and bolted it. After making sure that we were alone, she opened her heart, trying to draw me subtly into her conspiracy. "You took the words out of my mouth and spoke my mind. You see, Arjun that was why I wrote to you asking you to be here. First we have to prepare his mind for it. Then we have to look around for a suitable bride. In fact, I have already requested some four or six persons to do the bride-searching. But you see, if things have to speed up, all items and aspects must be harmonised into the happy event, your help is necessary to some extent. What do you think? Yes or no?"

I sat mum. She must have read in my contorted face my agree-

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ment with her, which she so badly wanted. At that point, I felt that Radhakka was even worse than my wife Rohini! At least at home one can protest and oppose openly, but here there was no appeal against Radhakka. She suddenly got up, murmuring why he had not come out of the bath, went inside, and returned with an electric shaver, meant for me. She placed it in my hand, saying, "This is for you, a gift." Then she went on to describe the various objects Govind had brought with him.

When my mind was in considerable confusion and unsettledness, Govind materialised before me. True, he appeared to be just coming out of a bath. But his smart jeans, dressing gown, his face bulging out, almost standing apart from the rest of his body, seemed to proclaim that he was a heavy drinker, and a burning cigarette was there in his hand.

He hugged me affectionately, saying, "Arjun, come on, old man. How are you? Wife, children? Say, you are growing old so soon! Is it fast living? You must dye your hair a little." Then after the exuberent show of affection, he told his sister, "Sister, today Arjun will stay with us. Please see that some chicken biryani etc., are cooked. Arjun, I have brought scotch specially for you—you, son of a gun, the Royal Salute, no less! Come, let's go upstairs. There is so much to unburden before you."

Radhakka intervened in a bantering tone, "Govind, don't start your celebration so early. Let it grow a little darker. Visitors may come now, and it wouldn't look nice if you were drunk when talking with them. And it would smell badly, the odour invading the entire hall!"

Placing a hand on her back, he said, "O.K. dear sister. I shall do the bidding of the high command!" Then he hustled me upstairs.

Within half an hour after our reaching the hall, he argued, "Look, there are still two hours to eight. It would be unfair to wait till then. Let us first start in a small way with Johnny Walker, and around eight we can begin the Royal Salute. O.K.? You see, even when in America, it is Scotch that we drink." Then he took two glasses out and began the session.

He regaled me with stories about America, its grandeur and glory, its life, its girls, and so on, his voice bursting with great enthusiasm. I punctuated his narration with occasional guffawing, probing the matter with questions, and greeting his replies with ritualistic "I see, I see," and finally managed to ask him about his marriage and divorce. You see, when you are filled with scotch, ideas in the head travel to the tongue with the speed of a lightning. He

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narrated his story with considerable artistry, capable of melting the heart of his audience. He said, "Arjun, when all is said and done, East is East and the West is West. We have our own culture and they have theirs. It was a grave mistake to have married an American girl. Had I had the capability of a novelist, I would have written one on the clash between the East and the West—yes, a novel. Then I am sure you fellows would have given me a Sahitya Akademi Award! I would have become famous in America as well. The Hollywood folks would have bought its filming rights. It is a most fantastic land. You must visit it, at least once. You manage to reach there, and I shall look after all your expenses there. You can be fully my guest, O.K.?"

It was eight when the Royal Salute bottle came out of its velvet bag. After getting the food ready, Radhakka and her mother came up and joined us in light gossip. Fully drunk, Govind was in full form. His talk and laughter seemed inexhaustible. Both Radhakka and his mother were drinking his every word avidly with affection, their eyes wide in admiration. My head too, was getting a little giddy. At that point, Radhakka introduced the topic of Govind's marriage. I joined her enthusiastically and said, "Yes, Govind you must marry. Yes, you must marry a girl of our soil, an Indian girl." My tone was somewhat rhetorical, bordering on speechification!

Govind bent down resting his head on his elder sister's shoulder and said, "Look, I am getting on to become an old man. Who will choose me now? The truth is I ruined my life for the sake of that white-skinned girl."

Radhakka consoled him, "You have still plenty of life left to live! Why are you worried?"

I asked him, "There in America itself you have plenty of Indians. Couldn't you pick someone among them?"

Govind began to speak now in a stagey manner, "They, too, are become somewhat Americanized. Above all, I want a good woman, one who can look after me. For example, it should be someone like my elder sister here. You see I have been to hell and back. I am like Lazarus! Now who will be ready to marry me! In a fashion I have become my own ghost! I have been dead and then returned to life. No, I don't want a wife. I want a sister. The person fit to marry me now is either a widow or a divorcé like me. Yes I do not mind a widow. But how can I get here a widow who can marry me out of love ...?"

Radhakka tried to raise his hopes, "You can get good unmarried women in cities like Bombay and Poona ..."

I was then totally drunk, with little control over myself. I

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suggested, "Shall I suggest a place?" Good old Royal Salute was doing its job!

I am sure if my wife were there she would have smiled at my words. Her eyes would have told me mockingly, "Well, I had told you earlier."

Well I had come here all the way shouldering a responsibility I did not want to take upon myself. Rohini was full of joy within. There was no delay in our implementing our scheme. We invited Nirmala for a dinner. Rohini broached the topic.

She said, "Look here, Nirmala. There is an excellent proposal for you." Rohini's attack was frontal!

Nirmala tried to laugh the matter away, "What? Now at my age? Well Rohini *tai*, you are always at something."

Rohini, "What is wrong with your age? You are around my age..."

I joined in, "The only difference is that her age shows, but yours does not, Nirmala." We all laughed.

Nirmala spoke seriously, "But I have dried up inside—have become a dry stick within." Now there was no option for us but to shower on her our sympathy.

Rohini was ready with her stock of stories and exemplars. She said, "Once the body is watered with marriage, it will sprout afresh, do you know? That Malini, you have no idea how she used to be before her marriage ..." Her strategy was to plunge into the main theme even as she was speaking about Malini's story. She said without notice, "Look, this is an excellent opportunity for you. The boy lives in America—his classmate! He is also a professor—"

Nirmala said with some interest, "Oh, yes, I remember your mentioning someone in the department during tea time. The same person?"

I gave a brief resume of Govind's life reciting it like a parrot, "you know the other day I had gone to our town. It was to meet him. Somehow from one thing to another, we happened to discuss you. Well, he and his folk, that is, his mother and elder sister got interested. Wait, let me first narrate his story. You should know everything, you see." While narrating it, I happened to repeat some of the words and sentences and ideas and sentiments of Govind, which had crept into it. Eventually the slogan, East is East, and West is West was mentioned.

Rohini inserted her routine theme of fate and fortune, and said, "That is why I always say, this is an unexpected good moment, auspicious moment!"

I shoulted, "Please, stop your talk about auspicious moment, fate and other philosophical matters. He may not take it seriously. When

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he visits here, I shall introduce them to each other. Well, if things work out, all the best. If not, no regrets. All right, let us give fate a chance! What do you say? We are not the ones to indulge in any mediatory role. As you know, I am not interested in it, and it even enrages me! Well, our role is a modest one—what is the word? Yes, catalytic agents! Our task is to bring you two together in one place—that's all! We should not be held responsible for any action and reaction—I am making the position clear right at the start. Let there be no misunderstanding or recrimination later."

I could see that Rohini did not like my hesitations, reservations, qualifications and hedging around. Rohini said, and I remember the English words she had used, "Nirmala *tai*, this is a great opportunity! Govind is a highly talented boy. A good gentleman—smart, handsome ..." I wondered at the way she employed the language of advertisement. In fact, Rohini's knowledge of Govind did not go beyond his mere photograph! Yet she did not hesitate to describe him in such glowing, hyperbolic language. How could I not get angry?

I spoke out, "Rohini, shut up! Don't rouse non-existent hopes and desires. Now you stop talking. Please ... let us leave everything to the future. Nirmala, please judge for yourself ... Make your own decision, your choice. Discount our words!"

Nirmala became very grave. I couldn't decide whether behind that gravity lay thoughtful deliberation or plain wrath. Had she taken it on the level of sheer prank, we wouldn't have had any of the complications and problems that later developed. I would have simply advised Govind to insert a matrimonial advertisement in the Times of India or the Hindu. It was precisely her gravity that led to all the fiasco. In the beginning, unable to resolve some deep inner conflict, she said, "Arjun Rao, let us leave matters as they are. Why all this trouble at my age?" But immediately she changed her stand and said, "I am destined to meet countless people in my life. I shall regard him also as one of them. We can regard this as an experiment, at least."

Rohini was unable to restrain herself, and she declared, "Fate willing, the experiment is bound to succeed."

I said with enthusiasm, "That is the spirit, Nirmala. There should be an openness to life. One should leave open several options."

Nirmala's wishes were galloping as she said, "I may have to consult my father later. I must win his approval."

I said, laughingly, "Of course! There has to be his blessing to crown the affair. Look here, madam, there should be a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity!

★ ★ ★

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Even after fifteen days, there was no letter from Govind. Meanwhile, the department had started functioning, and I had to meet Nirmala every day. Every time, we met I could not help showing my sense of guilt. What could I tell the poor woman? However, there was no doubt that some noticeable change had occurred in her behaviour and language. She began to use imported make up material, lip stick, scents etc. Already she had a bob-cut, but now she started to get a more attractive hairdo through a hair-dresser. During the tea recess, Prof. Nayak had fun at her cost. He said, "Hello, Nirmala, the breeze seems to be blowing in a new direction. Is it by any chance the breeze of spring season?" Somebody else quoted from Shelley's "Ode to the West wind", "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" Nirmala who was known for her sharp tongue and quick repartees, now said nothing. Only her face reddened. Once I went to her room and said, "I am sorry, Nirmala. I don't know why no letter has come from Dr. Govind Deshpande. Who knows what has happened at that end? Perhaps his health is not all right, I suspect. After all, those living in America and England lose all immunity."

Drawing sketches with a pencil irregularly on the paper before her, she said, "Why do you worry, Arjun Rao? It is all right! I am not waiting for things like the heroine in a Hindi movie. What does it matter if the letter arrives or does not arrive?"

I said, "But I have a guilty feeling about it. You were quite happy, your life running smoothly. I put some idea into your head, and disturbed you."

Nirmala replied with a dry laughter, "It is all right! Look here, Arjun Rao, there was nothing wrong in what you did. Your intention is good or rather was good. But the matter should not have been given so much publicity."

I responded confusedly, "I? It is impossible. The publicity work must have been my wife's."

After I went home, I asked Rohini about it. She swore in the name of God that she had not mentioned it to any other soul. She added, "Nirmala herself must have talked about it."

I said, "Rohini, whatever that may be, we have involved ourselves in the case. It is our duty now to act with responsibility. I shall go and send him a wire to come here soon."

Rohini expressed her impatience, "Instead of that you go personally. Bring here that brute once and then we can rest from the problem once for all."

I returned after sending the wire. Its text was: "Crisis, Come Urgently."

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His reply wire came: "I am going to Bombay to sort out my ticket and other problems and shall come after that."

We sat down deflated!

★ ★ ★

We received Govind's wire at last towards the end of July. As stated in it, he also came. I went to the railway station to receive him and took him home in a taxi. Our son Ramesh, a student at the Engineering College in Poona had returned to Poona after spending his vacation. We converted his room into a guest room and put up Govind in it. Govind chided us, "Why did you go to all this trouble? One must be an Indian in India. We enjoy the disorder of a joint Hindu family—"With his behaviour, his modest silence about himself, he won immediately Rohini's heart and mind. Govind let out a flood of words, "Sister-in-law, arrange to invite Nirmala *tai*. To-day and tomorrow we can spend time talking. Since she has a Toronto background, she, too must be a little modern. I must leave day after tomorrow morning, without fail. It seems there is father's death anniversary rite or something there. Sister has insisted on it. Arjun, do you keep beer or something? I am terribly thirsty. Sister-in-law, what have you for our dinner? Our Arjun has talked so much about your culinary art. Hasn't someone said somewhere that the shortest cut to a man's heart is through his stomach? That means, Nirmala *tai* will join us for dinner or will she? Arjun says she is great company ."

While drinking beer, Govind asked, "Arjun, would it be possible for me to date Nirmala tomorrow?" Fortunately Rohini was not there to hear his words! She was already busy with her work in the kitchen.

I reminded him, "Govind, this is India, Bharat. You cannot do such things here." My tone was quite stiff.

He explained his view point, "Look, friend, only when we date can we discover our compatibility as life-partners. We can only then understand each other, both on the physical and psychological levels. How else can we do it? All right, at least, we should have a little time to talk all alone by ourselves. How about it?"

I replied somewhat weakly and uncertainly, "Well, let us ask Nirmala herself. Govind, your meeting her or conversing with her in solitude, these things can come later. First, you should both meet." Sensing Govind's individuality, I became reflective and moody. I cursed myself for getting involved in his affairs. But that was the use of such thought? The die had been cast.

To gain support and strength, I shouted, "Rohini, Rohini." There

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was no answer from the kitchen. I said aloud, "Rohini, where are you? Can you give us something to munch?" Still, there was no answer. I went inside and asked the servant maid who assisted her, "Where is Rohini?" She said, "She left for Nirmala *tai's* house." I blamed myself for having bought a Luna for Rohini! I was planning to know Govind's thinking first, then invite her for dinner the following day when they could become acquainted with each other better, and then Govind could return to his town to think things over with his sister and then emerge with a final answer. But that was not to be, and in her over-enthusiasm, Rohini had rushed off to invite Nirmala for dinner right then. Well, this is the auspicious conjuction of time and events, this is fate and Karma!

That day's dinner was great. We were on the top of the world having finished my scotch and then got on to the half-bottle of Chivas Regal he had brought. Rohini and Nirmala had started with soft drinks, but soon Govind had persuaded them to take a peg of whisky. Nirmala was looking smarter than usual. Her talk was more sophisticated than usual. The Toronto ways of her Toronto days of some ten or twelve years ago, seemed to have returned and re-asserted themselves. Govind gave a hilarious account of his life, especially about his married life. He managed to stimulate Nirmala to recollect her Toronto life and experience. He expressed his astonishment at the fact that she had been there and returned, all intact and undamaged, without any involvement with any men! The discussion veered round to feminism. Nirmala gave a pretty little lecture on the necessity for women's liberation under the Indian conditions. Rohini's cooking was superb. Both Govind and Nirmala bestowed fulsome praise on the food. After dinner, we started to drink the liquor Govind had brought. Then he got up and sat very close to Nirmala on the settee. Rohini left under the pretext of cleaning up the kitchen. As Govind and Nirmala appeared to be carrying on some very private conversation, I thought it was better for me to leave than to sit there stupidly watching them. So I, too, left for the kitchen to help Rohini and also have a chat with her.

Rohini said, "Let them talk to each other freely for a while. I have a feeling that everything is working out beautifully as planned. What is your own reading of the situation?"

I was sceptical, "No, I don't share your optimism. I shall give a sigh of relief once Govind returns home day after tomorrow."

"Well, as far as I am concerned, this seems to be working out in fact, I think it is bound to. You have noticed how intimately and affectionately they are engaged in conversation" she said.

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"Nonsense" I said. That is the way he talks to everyone. Even with you he would talk in the same way, in the open-hearted American style."

"Whatever you say. We have done our job. It is upto them now to do what they want to do. Both are experienced person. They know what they want, being educated people and on top of it, foreign-returned ..."

"You silly girl, why can't they be inexperienced in some matters? If you ask me, Govind seems to be a big boy, still not really grown up. He still views the world and things in a sentimental, adolescent way. You should see how he behaves in his sister's company ..."

When we went out, we found the two laughing loudly.

I said, "Let us go. It is twelve. Very late. Let us all walk with Nirmala and reach her home."

Govind said, "Tomorrow Nirmala and I plan to go to Krishna Durga in a taxi. O.K.? We will spend some time going round and return before dark."

He asked Rohini, "We have decided on this course after mutual discussion, sister-in-law. What do you say to our plan?"

Rohini blessed the plan, "Yes, do it. Of course, you who hope to marry each other, must know each other better."

I remained dumb with wonder.

They were due back the next evening, but they didn't return even by night. Rohini and I sat opposite each other, staring at each other stupidly and uncomprehendingly. Till nightfall we had quite a few quarrels. We indulged in mutual recrimination. We did a thorough review of the situation. We speculated about the outcome of it all. When they did not return even by night, we grew silent or rather we were silenced by the situation. We assumed that they might have accepted each other and decided to marry, and then went quietly to sleep.

Rohini was worried, "Look here, suppose after all this Govind refused? Would then Nirmala let us get away with it easily?"

My worry was, "Did we suggest to them to date? In fact, when Govind wanted to date, I had categorically said, "impossible". Then why should he do this?"

Our worries had a respite. In the morning, when the taxi stood in front of our house at eight, we saw in the car only Govind and the driver.

Govind quenched our curiosity by saying, "We left Nirmala at her house. Let the taxi remain here. I have to catch the nine O'clock train and must hurry back home. I have had my bath. I would like some breakfast if it is available."

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Rohini hid herself in the kitchen. She arranged to send toast and omelette, but refused to show up, for some reason of her own.

Govind said, without rhyme or reason, "Sorry, old man! I couldn't return in the night. Don't worry. Nothing special happened. Somehow I could not feel romantic about her. Yet, I shall discuss the matter with sister and give the final answer. She is a good girl, yes, a good girl. Poor thing, she should have married years ago and lived a happy domestic life. May be a fellow like me is no good for her. She needs a husband like you—soft-natured, submissive and understanding. May be marriage is of no use to me. Yet I wish I had a child ... Deshpande's genealogical tree should grow. You see, I, too, need someone to perform my death rites and death anniversaries ..."

I asked a straight question, "What should be our final answer to Nirmala *tai*?

Govind, "Well, I have said my say. We must see what she, poor thing, has to say. Anyway ask her to forgive me for everything. Tell her that I am ready to do what she wants. I can never cheat anybody."

After putting Dr. Govind Deshpande in the train, I returned home, feeling guilty. Earlier when Govind had entered the kitchen to thank Rohini, she was not to be found there. Though I guessed that she must have gone to Nirmala's place, I didn't say a word about it.

The doors of Nirmala's house were open. As soon I stepped inside, the first thing my ears caught was the laughter of Nirmala and Rohini. I felt relieved. But as soon as I entered the sitting-room, their laughter ceased. Nirmala cast her face down. Rohini began to scan her face with curiosity.

I asked boldly, "Why have you been laughing?"

Rohini countered with another question, "Should one weep instead of laugh?"

Nirmala spoke in a calm, cool voice, "You see, after a certain age, none should contemplate marriage."

I simplified matters and said, "He has left everything to you both ..."

"No, not to me, but to his sister."

I asked, "You are not angry with us?"

"Certainly not. To tell you the truth I am grateful to you both immensely."

After a few days, news came from our town. Dr. Govind Deshpande had left his mother with his maternal uncle, and had left for America with his sister Radhakka. □

A sense of guilt continues to haunt me like a ghost.

Translated by the Author

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A Girl Called Stella

P. Lankesh

"STELLA came, the nurse. Olive-complexioned and with clean tapering fingers, cheeks with a touch of fading youth and thick hair. She was Subbanna's favourite. He thought no end of her. If only she could be on duty both day and night! He thought that her body exuded a smell of motherhood. He would know as soon as she entered the room. Once he had dared to ask her. Will you come and nurse me if I were to shift to my son's place? I'll pay you for it and make sure you don't lack anything. Stella had said nothing. She had patience and could be stern too. She had given him his pills and medicine and left without answering. Even her indifference which he thought was divine had whetted his curiosity about her. Not having enough courage to ask her again, he had started talking about himself. Subbanna hailed from a village near Shimoga. Having sold his property there, he had settled down in Nellandur near Bangalore and owned two houses besides a farm.

Stella had given her answer later. It'll cost you three hundred rupees a day. Don't take me amiss. That's the fees which our association has fixed. I can't accept anything less than that.

Fear and pain. Subbanna started coughing. He knew he was going downhill, both morally and physically.

His son and daughter-in-law visited him, as usual, promptly at eight O' clock. The son looked wasted, Subbanna's illness had taken its toll. The daughter-in-law too looked run down. They used to stay with him in the hospital before. Subbanna himself had felt bad about it and was in two minds for a while before he had sent them home.

The doctor too came in just as Suresh and Savithri arrived. After having examined the patient and talked to Stella, he told Suresh that he would like to have a word with him.

"Something private?" Suresh asked the doctor.

"Nothing like that. Your father's alright but we have to change the treatment. The drugs are expensive and there's need for surgery besides.

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The dialysis will cost you at least two hundred rupees a day."

"Why are you bringing up the matter of money?" asked Subbanna while Suresh sat with his head bent. The doctor explained, "It's better we are frank about such matters. There should be no misunderstanding later. What do you say, Suresh?"

Suresh sat there saying nothing. He didn't either shake his head or look at his wife who seemed to be avoiding his eyes.

The doctor obviously had decided on surgery. "It'll cost you nothing less than a lakh."

Subbanna had his eyes closed. Suresh and Savithri stayed silent and their silence had in it the explosive potentiality of lightning. Subbanna was beginning to grasp the truth. The doctor ended up saying, "Do think about it. I don't mind if you admit him into another hospital."

Suresh broke his silence. "Let's not worry about money, doctor. Do carry on with the treatment."

His voice was heavy. A nice young man, he was Subbanna's only son and worked as an English lecturer in a college. They had two children and Savithri was a smart woman with no touch of meanness in her. A graduate in Commerce knowing typing and with a Senior's Certificate in music, she could have taken up a job, if she wanted. She hadn't, fully occupied as she was in looking after the farm and her children. There was no time to spare either for reading or listening to music.

Subbanna was aware of the turmoil in Suresh's mind even though the boy had reassured the doctor about footing the bill. He said, "Listen, boy. Let me die. What's there to live for, now that I'm eighty five? A couple of years more shouldn't matter at this stage of my life. Why should you spend all that you have and get into a scrape?"

"It's not that, father. What's my own worth if I can't look after you when you are ill?" Savithri had placed her hand fondly on the old man's forehead, in support of her husband.

The truth was different, cruel. Subbanna was overwhelmed by his fear of death. There was no ring of conviction about his question, 'What's there to live for?' Years ago, the thought of death brought no fear into him. It was different now—thinking of death brought tears into his eyes. Another cruel truth was that his illness had reduced his own son into a small-minded man. Deep down, beneath his words, there was the question why death wouldn't come naturally to his father instead of bothering him in this manner. Suresh should be crying inside of him as much as his father did. His financial situation had become precarious. He had spent eighty thousand on nursing

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his father in the first year, and later a lakh. He had borrowed from every available source and his debts were weighing him down. He had already sold the farm and it might even become necessary to sell the house they now lived in along with the one that Subbanna had rented out. It wouldn't matter—he still had his lecturer's job. Who knows, the fact that he was a debtor might affect his work. The farm that Savithri doted on was gone and her spirits were low though she had managed to hide the fact from others.

One day, Suresh was late in coming for a visit. The farm had gone by then and he was once again deep in debt. He was involved in a minor accident as he rode his scooter on his way to the hospital. He wasn't hurt but something had given way inside. Subbanna, who himself was in a foul mood, took one look at his son and said, "I know what you are thinking."

Suresh kept quiet.

"And you know what I'm thinking about you."

Suresh kept his silence and that infuriated his father some more. Summoning whatever strength he had in him, Subbanna heaped abuses on his son, pounding his bed. Suresh said nothing. Subbanna started coughing blood. He desired to die at that moment of frenzied anger but was afraid. Stella arrived. Unperturbed by the spittle which trickled out with drops of blood, she cleaned him. Her brows were knit at Subbanna's behaviour. Subbanna lay back and as Suresh got up wanting to leave, his father tried to say something. Was it an attempt to make peace with his son or ask for forgiveness? Subbanna himself didn't know. He was seized by a fresh bout of cough which wouldn't stop. Stella massaged his neck and his back. As Suresh slowly walked out, he heard his father shout, "Listen, bastard, I don't want either that bitch of yours or you here! Understand?" Suresh walked away, his head bent.

Alternating fever and sleep. Deep down, Subbanna feared that it might be the state of coma which normally precedes death. He was at that stage when sleep and unconsciousness shed their difference the way good and evil or shame and self-respect did. Stella didn't have enough energy in her to explain things to him. She was in charge of the three patients in two wards and besides, she had her own personal problems. Her husband, Smith, had started drinking heavily. He was pressurising her to sell the three acres of wet land she had in Malabar and hand over the money to him. She had a feeling that he would leave her as soon as he lay his hands on the money. Their child, Nick, who spent the entire daytime in a nursery was never far from her thoughts, leading her to ask herself whether there was any point to her life.

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"Amma ..." Subbanna groaned, its tone both an outlet for his pain and a summon to Stella. He didn't mind if the girl didn't come in answer. His use of various endearing forms of address had increased as his helplessness grew. He hadn't left his bed for many days even for his excretory functions. His back was covered in bed-sores and he wasn't aware that his legs had stiffened as they stretched from under the sheet that covered his body. He was either in a state of daze or coma though Stella was sure that his brain functioned normally as he was aware of his state.

Stella was there when he called out 'Amma.' Subbanna extended his hand and she asked him what he wanted. His eyes pleaded for her hand and she touched his hand with hers. He caught hold of her young and warm fingers and hand and cried out, "Child, my child." His eyes shone as if a new life coursed through him. The increasing warmth of his touch made it clear to Stella that it wasn't a father's hand caressing his child. "Will you do something for me, please?" he asked. She had been nervous whenever he came out with such a question. It was no different this time though she asked, "What?" 'A dirty old man.' She told herself.

"Never mind," he said and let go of her hand. The fear in his eyes was that of a man being led to the gallows. His lips started moving even as she watched.

"I haven't wiped my bottom myself for three years ..." He started crying and Stella's stern heart melted. She held his hand which lay on his chest and his tear-filled eyes spoke of his gratitude. His other hand covered the back of her hand and he started muttering to himself. His words were about her, himself, the world, the gallows and death which could have been lurking just outside the room ...

"I wasn't like this once, so miserable and so dirty ... Do you believe it?"

Stella made no comment. She hadn't been able to check his bed-sores. Subbanna seemed to have forgotten them of late.

"1950. I should have died that year."

"Eh, Stella ..." It was Mary.

Stella's eyes asked what it was about.

"Francis is here." Mary said.

"I see." As Stella slowly got up, a shiver passed through her. Francis, who had said he would try to meet her, had actually turned up.

She was, however, reluctant to leave Subbanna's side as if she was face to face with an unexpected truth. "Stay here, I'll be back in five minutes." Stella made Mary take her place, placed her friend's

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hand on Subbanna's. "Just five minutes," she repeated and left.

Francis was there. Stella's legs were giving way unable to carry the body, trembling from head to foot in sheer excitement.

"Is your husband back?"

Stella didn't reply. There was dense darkness to the left of the nursing home, under the thick foliage of the poppy, on the nearside of the shrub with white flowers.

She went into his arms and he kissed her caressing her body with his hand. It was like kissing a flame—her longing was more intense than ever.

"It would be nice if you came today, I had thought," said Stella and he went on kissing her.

"Let me go. Come tomorrow." Stella wriggled out of his embrace. Francis stood there, shocked, like a swimmer suddenly caught in a whirlpool. He didn't move till she had disappeared.

"Alright?" Mary asked. There was still a mild tremor running through Stella's body and her face was flushed.

She took Mary's place and Subbanna opened his eyes wide as soon as he felt her hand. It was as if a new vitality had come into him. "Will you carry out a dying man's wish, girl?" he asked. He didn't wait for her reply before he added. "It's my will. Take it down. It's a strange one. Please write it the way I want."

Stella took out a pen and a sheet of paper. Subbanna had difficulty in turning over before he lay on his stomach. His bedsores had started troubling him.

"I, who should have died in 1950, am now certain that I shall die." He started sobbing and Stella read what she had taken down to stop him crying. "It was a grave mistake on my part to have avoided death at that time. My friend, Palakshappa died that year. He was a wrestler and I used to call him Palakshi. He was five years my senior and he would have been ninety, had he lived on. Nehru would have been a centurion, it seems, and Gandhi one hundred and twenty, had they been living ... My grandfather, one hundred and fifty. I had vowed to offer a special service to Dharmasthala's Manjunatha if he were to die. Imagine his being alive at one hundred and fifty—a bag of bones, flesh and mucus ... What could one do with such a living thing ...?"

"Come to the will, will you? Otherwise I'm leaving," Stella warned him.

"Why? The priest in our place was saying ... Take down ... It seems Bishma was a thousand when he died. What problems cropped up because the fellow forgot to die and went on and on ..."

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His cough brought him back to the world around.

"Palakshi was my friend, gentle like a cow, though an old wrestler. The men of the neighbouring village bothered him no end. Did I tell you that he was older than me by five years? Knowing that he would not retaliate, Goolya. Kaddipudi and Sannabasava of that village stole his crop of beans from the field. He went over to them and advised them to mend their ways. The same fellows later stole his sugar cane and then some bundles of hay. Palakshi didn't lose his temper. Encouraged by his attitude of tolerance, Goolya and Kaddipudi connived with the Shanbogh, forged some documents, called false witnesses and laid claim to two acres of his land. Palakshi asked for a meeting of the Panchayati saying that things shouldn't happen that way. Goolya and Kaddipudi saw to it that no one turned up for the meeting. I was upset and so went with Palakshi to meet the Shanbogh. Wasn't he a smooth talker, that bastard? He wriggled out of it and Palakshi kept quiet for three days as if he had been struck dumb. He didn't miss his daily trip to the smithy, though. Later he came to me with a question: Who was the most evil of them all and how would I arrange them in order of their evil. Early one morning, he sharpened his sickle and chopped them of, one after another. First, the Shanbogh and then Goolya, Kaddipudi and Sannabasava in that order. He returned to our village and so did the police. He died on the gallows six months later with a smile on his face.

"Mustn't forget it. I wasn't in the village when the police came. Though Palakshi didn't name anyone in that affair, it's true that I had my own apprehensions and so left the village. Palakshi would have been ninety if he were alive now. I still carry in me a vivid picture of his bearing—chest thrust forward. He had killed men and then gone up the gallows. Incidents of robbery, forgery etc. declined in our village following the event. Are you taking down what I'm saying? The reason why I told you all this is ... Isn't my will like a story, girl?" What started as a small cough grew and grew and Subbanna's body shook.

"Our Abubakker Sahib used to drink. He had a proud bearing and looked like an Englishman. He was a contractor in Shimoga and had plenty of money. We were very close and used to frequent each other's house. My wife, Parvathi, didn't like him, thought he was an evil man. Parvathi was a good woman, the daughter of the Patel of Ramenally. You don't know how goodlooking she was ... like Parvathi in the picture of Shiva and his consort, like the actress Bhanumathi. One day I was in Abubakker's place playing cards with him and some others. We had drinks and were talking loudly. Suddenly, a minor

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quarrel erupted and Abubakker said something nasty. I was drunk and called him the son of a mean-minded beggar. When he said I had no balls, I wanted to leave the place but didn't. We carried on hurling abuses at each other. A drunken quarrel, it went on and on. 'I'll sleep with your wife, you wait,' he said and I shouted that I would do the same. We didn't come to blows, though. 'On Sunday, the fourth."

It was the night of the fourth. There was a knock on the door and I sat there petrified. Parvathi opened the door to let in Abubakker who straightaway grabbed her. I was on fire and wanted to hit him but he tied me to a pillar in the living room, gagged us both and switched off the light. He had been drinking that night, I was sure.

"You may not believe it, but the unthinkable had happened. He had left but the lights weren't switched on. Parvathi sobbed the whole night. She had been humiliated and felt bad about what had taken place and so didn't look at me when it was morning again. I was burning with rage the whole day as Parvathi didn't bother to get up even once. When it was dawn again, I got up and looked for the sickle that Palakshi had used but couldn't find it. That evening I went to Budensabi's place, thrust some money into his hands and took his revolver. By the time I reached Shimoga, my anger had abated. I tried to whip up my thirst for vengeance and started walking round Abubakker's house. It was dark and there were the mosquitoes, droning away. I was furious with myself. When the rear door of the house opened, there was Abubakker turning the torch on me. He called out my name. Didn't laugh or say anything nasty. He took me by my hand and led me in. When I didn't respond to his smooth talk with either rage or laughter, he threw in the last dice. 'Forget it, pal. I'll give you one of my four farms ...'

"The farm was registered in my name within four days.

"Parvathi didn't get up again. I don't know whether she came to know of my compromise or whether her shame was beyond all words. She died.

"That was in 1950. Abubakker died five or six years after the event. He would have been eighty eight had he lived and would be lying on his sickbed just as I'm doing."

Stella stopped writing and got up. It was late, past her hours of duty.

"Do you know why I told you all this? Just a minute, girl. We go on saying that it's better to live like a tiger for a day than like a mouse for a hundred years. It's a cliche. Look at my lot, having to lie in my own piss and shit ... My son has become evil but he behaves as if he's

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good. I too am evil but haven't got strength enough even to pretend to be good. I have often thought during the last ten years that I should have chopped off Abubakker's head and smeared Parvathi's forehead with his blood ... I wouldn't have been the hypocrite that I am now. Or, I should have protested and died like the others in 1960 when the government raided our village to collect dues and attached our properties ... This is the last sentence of my will, girl. It's not how long a man lives that makes his life. No, it certainly doesn't ..."

"Lie down quietly," Stella said and left after placing what she had taken down under the cot. The nursing home was quiet. When she came out after bidding the watchman goodnight, Francis was still there. She was feeling somewhat out of sorts and had been dreaming about how nice it would be if Francis were to be there and there he was. She ran to him and hugged him. "Let's walk till Benson Town," he suggested. It was cool and at ten in the night Bangalore was quiet as usual. They were about to set off when they saw someone like Stella's husband coming towards them. "I think it's Smith," she said, a little nervous, and moved away from Francis. Yes, it was Smith. Stella and Francis pretended to be mere acquaintances as they approached him. Smith talked to his wife pleasantly and she introduced Francis to him as a matter of course.

"Come, let's have a drink. It's a pleasure meeting you", said Smith. Stella watched both men closely as they struck a friendship. Francis started talking about his bank and Smith gave an enthusiastic account of the garage he was about to open. Francis went on about the girl he was engaged to and addressed Stella as sister. "Sister, how's it that you haven't asked me home though you have such a wonderful husband like this? Look, it's settled. I invite myself with my fiancee to spending this year's Christmas at your place."

"Forgive me. I must go home. Nick will be waiting for me. Have a nice time together," Stella said.

"Why don't you also join us, darling? I had gone home on coming into the city. You don't have to worry, I have taken care of everything. Let's talk about your land. It'll be so easy to open the garage if we were to sell it and take a small loan from Francis's bank."

Stella's head was reeling. "I've a headache, I better go home," Stella excused herself and the two men walked away.

Stella's head was filled with Subbanna's story. Subbanna, who could have died anytime with a sense of either guilt or shame, now in living hell, a whimpering mouse because he couldn't live and die like a tiger. And her husband, who was ready for any kind of com-

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promise or shame as long he could lay his hands on her land. And her lover, Francis, who was more complex and dangerous than even Abubakker. They were all dying, just like Subbanna after the year 1950. Dying even while living, caught in the mire of piss, shit and spittle and living in shame, scared of life and scared equally of death.

'Have a nice time,' she muttered to herself. She sat in the rickshaw, sobbing with a strange sense of being utterly alone and utterly helpless.

"To Vaialikaval," she said in answer to the driver's enquiry and sobbed on.

★ ★ ★

That night, Subbanna died. There was a crowd by the time Stella turned up at the nursing home. Suresh and Savithri were by the bedside with tears in their eyes.

Stella couldn't look them in the eye. She went about silently helping in carting the body away. □

Translated by Ramachandra Sharma

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THE STRANGERS

Yashwant Chittal

THE ritual of morning tea being over, Ramakrishna and Janaki were in a cheerful mood when they came into the balcony outside their room. Today, tomorrow and the day after three holidays, one following the other. Over the past few days, guests had arrived one after another and they had been worn out playing host. They wanted to spend the next three holidays joyously. They had even chalked out a small programme the previous night.

The vista from the balcony of their third floor room was a familiar one. The big black tar road which stretched on in front of the building; many smaller roads branching out from this main road; compounds surrounded by six-foot high walls on either side. Ugly buildings of various heights built without any particular plan—as if they had sprung by themselves ... Right in the middle, rising above them, the tall and imposing clock tower ... Here and there, coconut palms which had managed to survive. Gulmohar trees which didn't blossom. What was there to see in them? Nevertheless, in their present joyful mood, they felt an excess of affection for them. The incessant movement of vehicles on the road, the activity of people, seemed very dear—congenial without reason. A big steamroller which had arrived to repair a part of the road was rolling backwards and forwards noisily. Even its jarring chugs seemed pleasant to their ears.

Then, all of a sudden, Janaki said anxiously, "They are coming to us."

Her eyes full of anguish were searching for someone or something at the end of a distant street. These meaningless words of hers sounding like someone jabbering in her sleep, had broken into Ramakrishna's sweet dreams.

"Who's coming to us?" he asked, his irritation obvious in his voice. "Haven't you shaken off your sleep yet?"

Even Janaki wasn't quite sure she was really awake. For sometime, she did not utter a single word. She looked again at the criss crossing

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roads. She had seen them just a minute earlier. Where could they have disappeared to? Was she just seeing things, she wondered. For quite some time, she couldn't spot anyone. She felt relieved somehow. But the feeling didn't last for long. The very next minute a low scream escaped her. "Look! I can see them now."

Taken aback, filled with anxiety, Ramakrishna turned round and looked at her. "Where? Show me too."

"Look, there ... from here, the first, second, third, fourth ... Yes, at the end of the fourth road. Do you see them? You can see them through the space between the building in front and the clock tower. Have you spotted them? Look, look, you just see their heads over the compound wall behind the clock tower. A man, a woman and a porter carrying a trunk on his head."

"Oh, Janaki! What has happened to you today? Why are you acting like this? As if you are frightened by a bad dream? I can't even see their faces, let alone recognise them. You have concluded they are coming to our house just by looking at their heads and the trunk on a man's head! Who knows who they are or where they are going? Your mind, tired of looking after guests, seems to be imagining such things lately," said Ramakrishna as if to exercise his wife's foolish fear. But he felt a little ill at ease when he said so, for an incomprehensible fear had gripped him too. Striving to hide his own fear and with the intention of distracting his wife's attention from the streets which she still scanned with frightened eyes, he said, "Come along. How long will you stand there staring like that? Let's play rummy. Anyway, we are going out for lunch. No bother about cooking." He went in and sat on a sofa in the room and waited for his wife. But she stood there in the balcony, rooted to the spot. He spoke in a voice with sympathy. "Really, Janaki, don't act as if you have lost your senses. If anyone was really coming to us, wouldn't they have let us know by letter at least?"

Janaki's reaction was sudden and furious. She charged into the room and sat with a thump on the sofa. "Yes ... all that is left for them is to barge in and settle down as if it were their own house and throw us out ... Guests who arrive after letting us know by letter? Wonderful people! Brothers? Close relatives? Good friends? Have they not come and gone, regardless? Have there not been people who, after all that we did for them found fault with our hospitality?"

"Janaki, Janaki, please! Can't you stop? Who wants this nonsense now? We have three free days. Let us relax and spend them happily ... Shall we play rummy? We could have gone to some morning show at least. But there are no good films."

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Janaki was lost in her own thoughts and paid no attention to what Ramakrishna said.

"What is the use of blaming them? We are so meek. Those that dig will dig where it's soft. Where else? Now, in this same building why don't people come to other houses? What lovely families—they plan outings as soon as the holidays come. Us? When neighbours say: 'Akka, aren't you going anywhere?' I always give the same answer: 'No ... We are expecting guests.' If they want to know who it is, how can I possibly say, 'I don't know who it is.' 'He is a friend of a friend of my husband coming to Bombay for an exam,' I blabber. The whole lot are like that. A distant friend of the big brother, someone else of the little brother ... sitting for an exam, coming for an interview. People coming just to visit Bombay or for treatment of some damned illness ..."

"Oh, Janaki, Janaki ... What has happened to you today?"

"No! No! I can't stand it a day longer."

"Can't you stop now? Why do you remember all that is over and done with and ruin the day which is right before us ...?"

"You know what Mrs Kale of the flat below said yesterday? 'I hope, dear, that you have no guests at least for the next three days. Poor soul. Not even a year since marriage. Shouldn't they have some sense at least? Honestly, husband and wife need to be by themselves for a few days at least after marriage.'"

Then, there was the sound of the gate opening downstairs and someone was heard asking if it was Savithri Sadan. A question in a clear male voice. The next moment, a female voice enquired: "How do we go upstairs?" Then, the sound of the footsteps on the stairs. Janaki was listening breathlessly, ears pricked up. In her mind, she was counting the steps as they climbed. Eyes filled with apprehension and anxiety were riveted on the door. Seeing the strange expression in his wife's eyes, fear took root in Ramakrishna's mind too. He stared at the door with nervous concentration ... He too had been listening intently to the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. All of a sudden there was light perspiration on his chest and forehead. Lips lost colour ... Even as the steps reached the third floor, husband and wife looked at each other with eyes filled with trepidation and they rose from the sofa together, instantly ... They stood listening to the footsteps coming towards their door. Their hearts were thumping ... The waiting seemed endless ...

Then there was the sound of someone knocking hard on the door.

Without any reason, Ramakrishna and Janaki thought, that whoever knocked on the door like that must be angry. Ramakrishna

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hurriedly reached the door and opened it with trembling hands. He and Janaki froze when they saw the people standing before them, like snakes coiling in helplessness at the sight of a Garuda. A tall dark broad shouldered man. A bushy moustache, a span long, had lent a strange ferocity to a strong face which seemed to be cast out of molten iron. A pure white dhoti worn full length, concealing his feet. A thin, white shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows revealing black hairy forearms of enormous strength. A thick neck with hard swollen veins. A broad chest proclaiming extreme arrogance.

The woman matched the man perfectly—made to be his wife. The same dark complexion: a nine-yard saree worn with pleats tucked between the legs; hair tied up at the back, tightly into a bun; an old-fashioned blouse with sleeves coming down to the elbows. Face, neck and arms proclaiming the same arrogance as the man's.

A feeling that these strangers, never seen before, who had appeared at their door without a word of warning, were not from this world, arose in Ramakrishna's mind and his hair stood on end. It seemed as if two people read about in mythology, history or some thrilling story or novel had suddenly come to life and were standing before him. What had happened wasn't a mere illusion, was it? But the familiar porter who had come with them carrying their trunk was proof enough that it was no illusion. Even the helpless expression on the face of his wife who was crumpled up with fear like him, at the sight of those two people, established the same .. Had they come looking for someone else, lost their way and arrived at their house? There was no nameplate on his door. Should he ask? Ramakrishna couldn't summon enough courage to do so. His mouth had already dried up. Moreover, the visitors gave him no chance to speak. The man looked at Ramakrishna and Janaki who were looking at them with frightened eyes as if they were merely a couple of nobodys. He pointed to a corner of the room and ordered the servant to place the trunk there. Ramakrishna trembled at the arrogance and the authority in the voice. Somehow the memory of a cruel character in a Yakshagana play that he had seen in childhood flashed like lightning in his mind and disappeared.

The porter had promptly entered the room, placed the trunk in the place he had been ordered to, and made his way hastily towards the door even before asking for payment. The man who had already stepped into the room stared at him and thundered, "You, stupid fool, don't you want money? How much is it?" The servant said in a frightened voice, " Eight annas." Then the man turned towards Ramakrishna. "Give him eight annas and send him away," he said.

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There was the same authority in the voice..

Ramakrishna went inside at once, as if he had been waiting all these years for the man to come home, waiting for his orders and waiting to obey them. He started rummaging for his wallet in the cupboard. He couldn't find it. He called Janaki in a low voice. But that woman was already giving Janaki a job to do. "Both of us need to bathe. Start heating the water immediately." Janaki rushed into the kitchen to light the stove. Meanwhile, Ramakrishna, who was looking for his wallet and getting scared because he couldn't find it, had started pulling out his shirts and trousers from the hangers at great speed, throwing them on the floor after checking their pockets. In a minute all the clothes from the cupboard lay spread out all over the floor. But the wallet was not found. In his frustration he started berating his wife, more in fear than in anger, blaming her for not helping out ... The next moment, the stranger, fed up with waiting, came to the door and stood with both hands stretched across the door-frame, as if barring the way out. Ramakrishna's courage drained away as he saw the impressive figure spreading itself all over the little door. The disorder in his activities became even greater.

"Oh, what maddening clumsiness! Is this the way to keep clothes? Is this a house or a cowshed? Haven't you found the money yet? How long are you going to make the poor man wait? If you haven't got the money, can't you just say so instead of creating this turmoil?"

The same arrogance in his words. The same authority.

"No no. There's enough money. P ... P ... P ... Here it is .." Ramakrishna mumbled and took out an eight anna piece from the wallet he had found at last. He didn't dare ask the man who was in his way to move. He tried to go out through the kitchen. Then the man's voice thundered again. "Hey, you fool. Why are you going there? Go this way. He is standing next to the door." As he bellowed, he moved aside a little. Ramakrishna used the small opening to slither out to the verandah where the porter was waiting. But he had disappeared. Ramakrishna rushed down the steps, all the way down the three floors, as if something dreadful had happened, and went to the gate and looked around. The porter was nowhere to be seen. "O, dear! What shall I do if 'he' asks me?" he thought worriedly as he rushed up the stairs. By the time he reached home, the awareness of it being his own home had been completely erased from his mind. He entered the house humbly as if it was 'their' house and he was 'their' menial. He approached the stranger, who was now sitting on the sofa, and whispered softly, "That man went off without taking the money." There was a guilt in the tone as he uttered these words,

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as though he had committed a crime.

"He went off? Well, well, your eight annas are saved," he said in a contemptuous voice. "Why are you staring at me like that? Go, go, go in. Put those clothes away neatly. And see what your wife is up to in the kitchen. Help her a bit ... Goodness, what gawky people! When will you ever learn some organisation?"

These words did not hurt Ramakrishna even though he and his wife were known in the whole block to be well-organised and tidy householders. The very consciousness of 'I', 'my wife', and 'my home' seemed to have been destroyed. He felt bad, wondering whether he was the most untidy man in the world ...

He walked into the kitchen to help Janaki. Together they got water ready for the guests to bathe, made tea soon after. Lunch, followed by an afternoon nap, evening tea and supper. As they saw to everything in a very organised manner, they seemed to have forgotten that they were man and wife. Throughout the day it was obvious that they felt like mere servants, without any relationship between them whatsoever. They took all pains to please them—as if wanting to earn their approbation.

The awareness that they were truly husband and wife and masters of the house and that they had forgotten all about it under the wicked hypnotic influence of these strange guests came very late to Janaki and Ramakrishna. When they got beds ready for the visitors for the night and stood by the bedroom door as if awaiting further orders, the man had commanded.. "Why are you standing there staring at us? Go to your room and sleep." Even as he was closing the door, the man said. "We must leave early in the morning. I don't know if you have the habit of waking up early or not. You need not get up. I have already told the porter who came in the morning to come." Ramakrishna and Janaki felt that the earlier harshness and inhumanity was no longer discernible in the man's voice, perhaps due to the fact that they were safe in their own room behind closed doors. They also felt relieved by the knowledge that after all the trouble that had suddenly descended upon them was lifting. Very soon, they lay down utterly exhausted, as if the realisation of the mental agony they had been subjected to since the morning had come to them just then. They looked at each other with frightened eyes and started talking in whispers.

"Do you know who they are?"

"No I don't understand this at all. No one has put us under a spell or something. I suppose."

Then the woman's voice spoke from the outer room:

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"Can't you switch off the light and go to sleep?"

Immediately Ramakrishna got out of bed and switched off the light like an obedient boy. Then, his mind screamed with an impotent rage. "Goodness! The arrogance of these people! Their impudence! They invade even our privacy!" But he had lost the strength to rebel against it. They took refuge in sleep which came early either as a result of extreme mental exhaustion or the realisation of their impotence.

Ramakrishna got up in the morning much later than usual. The light of dawn coming through the window by the roadside had filled the room. Ramakrishna sat up in bed and saw the simple innocent face of his sleeping wife. Overwhelmed with tenderness he kissed her face gently. He came out in a very cheerful state of mind. He noticed the door at the side slightly ajar. He went towards it quickly, worrying if they had forgotten to close it the previous night. Then the memory of yesterday's happenings came back to him slowly. However, there was some consolation too. Thank heavens, they have left at last. Were they really here? Or was it just a nightmare? Had some of his friends, aware of his gentle nature, done a bit of play acting just to make fun of him? Or, may be, someone from my own village ... I didn't even ask them myself. Who could it be? Who could these bizarre strangers be, bossing us around? Then his mind hissed in anger. "No, No. That is not the question at all. Whoever they might have been why did we not ask them who they were. We gave up that right ourselves... In fact, we are spineless, we are impotent." Ramakrishna felt contemptuous and angry with himself. "I threw away the freedom I had in my own house ... Fool, coward, coward! ..."

Ramakrishna got up suddenly from the sofa and went out to the balcony. He noticed a calendar hanging on the balcony wall. Three days in red proclaimed holidays—yesterday, today and tomorrow. Curiously Ramakrishna was furious when he saw them. He went near the calendar, pulled off the page and tore it into bits. As he watched the bits of paper descending helter skelter in the wind, he looked suddenly at the road in the front. The steam-roller he had seen the previous day had come to repair the road. As it turned back and forth, the stones spread out on the road got flattened one after the other. A bigger stone, lying a little away from the steam-roller, caught Ramakrishna's attention. It provoked unusual curiosity in him. He was eager to find out how that would resist the steamroller. Twice or thrice the roller almost touched it and got back. Ramakrishna's curiosity knew no bounds. He went on staring waiting for the ultimate moment as if he was going to witness a divine event. Eventually, even

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that stone was overpowered by the tremendous weight of the roller and got flattened like all the others. He did not know why, but at first he had a deep contempt for the stone. But now an incomprehensible sympathy slowly filled his heart. □

Translated by Padma Ramachandra Sharma



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THE ONES WHO SOLD THEMSELVES

Devanoor Mahadeva

BIRA sat facing the evening crimson, and in his head Kittappa began to appear in a hundred different forms. Kittappa could have brought his dying father a mite of comfort by agreeing to the marriage, but his own pig-headedness was bigger for him than his father. Although he'd flunked his exams because he was busy while at College chasing the girl he was soppy on, his craze for her didn't wear off even after his return to the village. He continued to go off to Mysore once in a week or a fortnight. The Gowda on his part advised him, abused him a sufficient number of times before giving up. His son had come of age, and so the Gowda didn't lately tell him off no matter what Kittappa did. "What could I do?" "Stay quiet atleast till I die, you perishing blighter! I told him. But he wouldn't listen. Every thing is screwed up; it's okay even if the house is sold. I should have got this rascal to till our fields instead of sending him off to town. But why blame him when it is in fact I who's made the mistake? ..." The Gowda would swallow the rest of what he wanted to ventilate, and pulling a long and bitter face, would smile the whole thing away.

They are stinking rich. Kittappa should be living in style, shouldn't he? Instead, he lies stewed in this wine-bibbers' den ever so often. He doesn't leave the place for ten, fifteen days. If I say something, he bears down on me. And I can't really force the issue because he is my master, the one who gives me my daily ragi balls ...

It'll be one year on the coming Ugadi festival since we came here. Destitute and desolate, we didn't have anything when Lakshmi and I left the village for good. We got on the last bogie of the train and when we reached Mysore, it was night. We slept at the railway station itself, washed up at the tap in the morning, and were sitting with our knees under our ears and our hands on our heads when Lakshmi suggested we go to Nanjangud. "Okay", I said, and we got on the train that was about to chug off. We hadn't bought tickets, and so were in a pickle

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when the ticket collector asked to see our tickets. It was then that, coming to our rescue like a god, our village headman, the Gowda spoke to the ticket collector. He then turned to us to ask us who we were and where we were headed. "We've left our village in search of work. We are *haalu matasthas*" The Gowda thought for a while before saying "I need two sturdy persons to work in my grove. There's a homestead there. If you agree ..."

Turning, Bira looked in the direction of the village. Daylight had already ebbed away. "Kittappa should have been here by now, shouldn't he?" he said wordlessly to himself as he lit a beedi. At a distance was a torchlight which was coming towards him. Bira ran his eyes over the torchlight, letting them follow it where it went, and as it came quite near him, he craned forward to look: It was Pasha from the flour mill who came and stood in front. "The motor coil has gone out of order. Kittappa took it to Mysore for repairs. He won't come today," he rattled off the moment he arrived. "Is it so?" Bira asked. Pasha hobbed his head, the bob saying; "Yes, it is." "I'll take leave," Pasha said, and as he turned to go, Bira invited him: "Come on in, you muslim! You could eat your meal here before you leave." "No, sir, I can't. There are lots of people waiting at the mill. I'm running the smaller mill now. Kittappa told me to tell you. I'm here to tell you," returned Pasha before he quickly made tracks. Bira coughed once or twice. As the fire at the fag-end of the beedi he'd lit sometime back touched his hand, he let a second beedi catch fire from the glowing one, then strolled into the shanty.

Lakshmi thought to herself: It's frightfully cold these days. When it is so cold indoors, how would it feel outdoors? Bira is forever sitting on that stone as if it is his father's property. When I went out, I shammed a cough. Yet the fellow didn't turn to look!

She put some salt into the *saru* that was boiling noisily on the fire. The piquant smell of the *saru* spread all at once round the hut. There was the sound of the hut-door opening. She craned forward and looked. She saw Bira amble into the hut, but Kittappa was not to be seen. "Kittappa will not come to-day, it seems, woman!" Bira piped up. "He's gone to Mysore. Pasha had come to convey this." Then he walked towards the arrack-bottles in the room. Although Lakshmi felt apprehensive about the possibility of her husband drinking up every drop and kicking up a stink, she felt comforted by the thought that she was after all used to whichever way he behaved. The thought brought on a smile as well.

Over there, in the outer hall of the hovel Bira sat down before an eating plate before he undid the corks of two distilled-liquor bottles

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and put them aside. Lakshmi who came there with ragi balls felt the surge of laughter in her throat. "Don't be greedy and drink much, damn it!" she scolded. Bira hee-hawed before he purred, "Today I've thought of drinking and eating my fill, and then peeling you!" Although he didn't quite mean what he said when he said it. Once drunk he did go on to do what he said he would. Lakshmi felt her body tingle with cold. She padded into the kitchen, and, stoking the ash-covered cinders, started to warm her hands. She could hear Bira slurp down the coarse country liquor at one go. "Bring me some more, woman!" he demanded. "Oops! He eats as if possessed by a devil!" Lakshmi exclaimed, her eyes popping out in amazement. She brought him a bowlful of meat from the kitchen. Bones lay all around Bira. He'd emptied one and a half bottle of arrack. Lakshmi all but said "Good God! ... what is this, fellow? you eat like the devil!" But since Bira had loads of arrack abroad, she didn't let the words trip out of her mouth as she tipped the bowl of meat into his plate. The place around Bira was stinking. Lakshmi's head spun, and she felt like throwing up. She stuffed her mouth with her saree-end ran into the kitchen and sat down there. 'Bira has changed lately,' Lakshmi thought inwardly, falling into a meditation. 'He tanks up and then smokes an endless number of beedies. The healthy lustre which used to glow on his face has drained away, and he's gone lean. No matter how much you advise him, he pays no heed.' Lakshmi mentioned to him once the death of a wealthy heavyweight of Mallipura because of a heart attack brought on by excessive drinking. "Who lives for ever, tell me" he'd thrown back then after a brief silence, and, as he said what he did, gave an enigmatic smile. "The world won't come to an end if you don't drink" Lakshmi tossed back. Bira gave her a long look before gulping, "I would!"

After a while Lakshmi leaned her head and looked. Bira lay asleep, stretching his legs along the floor. Not even a drop of grog had remained in the bottles. In the eating plates were two pieces of meat. "Thoo ... this is his lot," she griped before she gathered into the plate the bones that lay about. Bira opened his eyes, which had been half-open. They looked like live coals. He made some inarticulate noises before asking, "Who is it? Who is the gutsy fellow who has come near me?" Anger burning in her, Lakshmi grated back, "Lie down now without a word." "Oh, my luchumi! ... come dear, come! I thought it was someone else!" Bira cooed before he tried unsuccessfully to crawl upto her. Then he lay down, closed his eyes and started drawling "Lachumi! Lachumi!" Lakshmi laid out a mat in a corner of the room and lay down with her face turned to the wall. She pulled

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up the blanket over her to cover even her face before she put out the lamp.

As darkness descended on the room, Bira asked ever so slowly, "Who is it? which bum took away my sun?" Mirthful laughter welled up in Lakshmi which she couldn't keep from bubbling over. She laughed loud and long. "You're laughing? laugh!" Bira piped. "You must be out of your mind." Lakshmi giggled at this too. "I won't leave you no matter where you go ...", Bira hollered. The loud voice made Lakshmi feel as if her head was going to crack. "Don't talk. Don't plague me," Lakshmi chided him. Bira kept mum for a while. "I know now who it is." Bira smiled in recognition. "My Lachumi! My lovely Lachumi." Lakshmi didn't say anything. "You are still shy? Even after so many days of our marriage? When I say 'come', you should 'come'!" Lakshmi still kept wordless. But she beamed a child-like laugh. This lashed Bira into a fury. "You won't come even if I call you, girl?" he bristled. "Lie quietly." Lakshmi's voice was gruff. Check! "What? You've come to this, girl?" Bira bellowed. Lakshmi grumbled something. "Won't you talk to me? ... Why would you talk to me? You'll talk only to Kittappa. Kittappa is your lover, isn't he?" It was as if the heavens had fallen on Lakshmi. Her limbs quivered. She summoned enough courage to ask, "What're you saying?" and then perked up her ears. "What am I saying? You think the world wouldn't know what a cat is doing if she laps up milk with eyes closed? Ha! Ha! Ha! ... I'll sort you out ... let the day dawn. I'll skin both of you alive. You thought I was a blinking idiot! ... Nothing is lost yet. Wan't day break after all whon't he come after all? He sure will come to see his lover ..." He hee-hawed, coughed continuously for a while, and hawking, spat right there. Then, as he said 'Ussappa' as an expression of fatigue, swallowed. "It's ready, the hatchet! ... I've kept it on the rafter," he breathed darkly, his tone serious and earnest. She sat leaning her hand against the floor. He guffawed and, coughed before saying 'Ussappa' again. Then he hawked over again before spitting out phlegm. A brief silence followed. Lakshmi was still sitting. Her head was in a whirl, and her legs quaked. Her heart beat uncomfortably against her ribcage. After a while a deep snore sounded in the hut.

So stunned was Lakshmi that she looked as if smitten by an evil spirit. 'One couldn't dismiss Bira's barrage of words as the babblings of a drunkard' she said getting into an inner conversation with herself. 'How could he say what he did without smelling a rat? Bira has come to know everything. God! ... What would he do?' It was quite some time since the hostel bell marking meal-time had gone. It was perhaps

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midnight now. The hut rang with the sound of snoring. The smell of liquor made one recoil in disgust. Bira rolled about. He coughed continuously for a considerable while. Then the snore again. Lakshmi felt sleepy. She yawned. She pressed her head into her knees and closed her eyes.

It was on the day after we entered the grove that Kittappa came into the grove, Lakshmi recalled. Bira introduced me to Kittappa with these words: "He is the son of our master." Kittappa gave me a long hard look. Bira coughed. I turned to face the wall and kept looking at the ground, then broke out in a sweat. Unable even to stand, I strode in saying I had to sweep the homestead. Although Kittappa stood outside the hut, I felt as though his eyes bored into me even after I'd disappeared into the hut ...

Grinning Bira brought home a few hooch bottles one day. The meat he'd brought was a little more than usual, too. Bira said Kittappa would visit them. I didn't say a word. I cooked a meal. Kittappa arrived minutes after night fell. He'd really spruced himself up. "Have you by any chance come to see a bride-prospect, Kittappa sir?" Bira asked grinning from ear to ear. Kittappa smiled in answer. This man might have smiled as he came out of his mother's womb.

The twosome drank and ate. Bira knocked back more than Kittappa did. Then, as he lost control over his eyeballs, he left his eyes almost half-open, and stretching out his legs, fell over. Kittappa didn't leave although hours passed. I went into the kitchen. Kittappa coughed before he sat for a while on the rope-bedstead that was there even before we came to work for him and then lay down on it. With my heart in mouth I laid out a rug on the bare mudfloor, lay down and covered myself with a blanket before putting out the lamp. The room was submerged instantly in darkness. I closed my eyes, but sleep did not come to me. Unnamed memories of our village which we'd put behind us poured back into me ...

I was dimly awake. The sound of Bira's snoring was distinctly audible. So were Kittappa's intermittent coughs. There was also this rustling noise made when he rolled over to sleep on his other side. Red light glimmered whenever Bira drew on his beedi. Then the snore again. Pitch-black darkness hid everything. I shut my eyes tightly. Yet there were no signs of sleep seizing me. I could neither cough for fear of waking the sleepers nor swallow because that would have stood out in the dead stillness of the night. Bira was of course deep asleep. Kittappa however was still wide awake it seemed. He was smoking and coughing. Putti who'd come sometime back to weed the plantation had blabbed to me everything of Kittappa's life. 'What

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if they come to know? Thoo....' Lakshmi remembered exclaiming to herself ...

"Lakshmi", somebody called. The caller jerked her with his hand, and Lakshmi started as she woke up suddenly. She didn't know when she feel asleep in the midst of all that anxiety and tumult. Her heart began to beat so violently that the sound could rip off the hut itself. The intruder ran his palm ever so slowly over her body. Lakshmi started to breath in irregular jagged bursts. The interloper put one hand over her thigh and, holding her chin with the other, shook it. 'Silence is no longer discreet,' thought Lakshmi before she spluttered as if startled: "Who is it?" "It's I, Kittappa", the man replied. Bira's snores sent shivers down Lakshmi's spine. Kittappa's hand was busy feeling her on her thigh. Bewildered, she uttered rapidly. "Bira is sleeping." What should Kittappa's reply to this be but "Oh! he's lying like a log of wood there drunk."

Light broke over the hut, Bira woke up, and as he yawned and stretched, he felt lighter. There was nevertheless a little of the hang over of last night's booze. Vigorously rubbing one palm against the other he took a look at them before calling, "Lachumi". There was no answer. 'It is several hours since the sun has been up. Has such deep sleep gotten hold of her?' He asked himself in surprise, rolled over onto his right side, moved the blanket a bit and looked in the direction of the room. Lakshmi was sleeping curled up with the blanket pulled up to cover even her face. Bira's eyes held on the stripped blanket that Lakshmi had covered herself with. Last Monday Kittappa had gifted him that blanket saying, "Take Bira we have winter approaching." When going to bed that night Lakshmi held it fast, smiling up her sleeve as she said, "I need this." Bira stretched out his hands and pulled her to him then as he told her "Okay. You take it, but give yourself to me. You're warmer than that blanket!" She giggled ...

She must be feeling warm now.

Kittappa's blanket over Lakshmi and Kittappa's roof over their heads. What happens to me doesn't matter. But Lachumi? When a boy in shorts teased Lachumi in the Patel's house, and when heard about it. Bira had held him by the scruff of his neck before thundering. "You may be a moneyed man. But that is in your house. Don't show it before me!" Then the Patel intervened and calmed down Bira saying, "This is a lad from the other village, he did it unknowingly." When they were back home, Lachumi had leaned on his chest.

Bira moved his left hand on his belly, and moving it up, placed it on his chest. A stab of pain darted inside his chest. Lakshmi's words

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came back to him: "You don't listen no matter how many times I ask you not to drink. A heavy weight of Mallipura died of a heart attack due to heavy drinking. It seems drinking eats into your intestines." Musing Bira thought supposing what came over the top dog of Mallipura happens to me as well, what would be Lachumi's lot? ... Bira felt out of sorts. He felt like smoking. Moving the pillow over he looked. There were no beedies to be had. It was misty outside. It was beastly cold, and there were no beedies to boot. He had to endure the chilly and beediless state till it shone.

"Yours is still the age of growing," remarked somebody sarcastically. "Cop it! He's still sleeping like a tiny tot. Are'nt you ashamed?" Is it Kittappa who's come so early? Bira wondered. With the blanket over him, Bira got up and looked in the direction of the kitchen. Lachumi was still asleep. He felt like waking her up but decided against it. He raised his folded hands to his chest in salutation to the framed picture of Goddess Chamundi that hung on the wall on the right. The shanty faced east. As he undid the bamboo frame doubling for a door, sun's rays slanted into it. Bira looked out. It was Kittappa who was standing outside.

Lakshmi woke up, and even though was composed, the dimness that goes with the sleepy state hadn't completely disappeared. Last night's memory stung her, and in a reflex her eyes sought the rafter. The hatchet still lay there. Lakshmi felt butterflies in her stomach. She then popped her head round the kitchen doorway and looked. Bira was already up. He was talking to somebody outside. She walked soundlessly upto the hut-door and looked through an opening in the door. What she saw took her by surprise. Kittappa stood there.

For some reason Kittappa smiled.

Bira smiled too. □

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INTERVAL

Jayant Kaikini

HERE, we have Manjari Sawanth—the plain and scrawny 20 year old who abstractedly watches the muttering TV of the neighbour in the crowded Mahindrakar Chand next to the ice-factory in Naupada. There, we have Nandu or Nandakishore Jagthapa—usherer at the Malhar theatre who has just switched on the fans and noisily opened the curtains while the final music of the first show is still blaring out, and the hero stands in front of the mirror in the men's toilet. Their plan to elope early the next morning is as secure tonight as the secret of a bud about to open.

For the last three years, heroes of various hues have been saying to their heroines four times a day for 27 crowded weeks in the same theatre, "come, let's elope." A pretty girl, smiling and gazing into his eyes, springs out of the fountain, and running along the seats in the upper stalls, disappears. Where does she go? Does she melt in the enveloping darkness never to be seen again, not even in dreams? The lights that come on after the happy ending reveal the patches on the hero's trousers and make the frayed edge glow. The hero rushes to put off the lights for the next show. With his torch, he lights up anxious faces, groping hands and stumbling feet. As the audience lose themselves in the world of wonder and fantasy, he switches off the fans in the foyer and, surrounded by dull curtains and loud posters, tries to snatch some rest, undetected by the manager. As he snoozes there, a thousand heroines forget everything, even their names, dazzled by the silver screen. In the darkness, they pledge their bodies and travel into the hero's dream. Caressing and kissing him repeatedly, they declare their love for him. Woken rudely by the loud bell, his heart nearly broken, the hero runs to the door to let the surging crowd out from the dream world. As he counts the used tickets, his hand keeps going back to the red comb jutting out of his pocket. In the rain, without an umbrella, a girl runs through the city

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lanes to reach home shivering, and her brother, father and mother shout at her for coming so late.

Nandu had left his house in Vidarbha three years ago for the magic land of Bombay. Since he started working in the theatre, a single atom in the magic land, his home in Vidarbha had become remote to him. Nandu who had been awed even by the people pasting up the nose, eyes and legs of the romantic stars on the hoardings was now one of the them by becoming an usherer. The magic land, in all its colourful splendour, had seemed beyond his reach in Vidarbha. But now it was here in his hands, in the tickets he was punching. While the show was on, Nandu would walk about as though he were in charge of the stupendous dream full of a million tales of joy and sorrow, victory and defeat, song and dance. It was fun to sit outside in the foyer smoking while thousands surrendered themselves to the dark. It was fun to know that they did not know who the culprit was. And then one day, she walked in hesitantly after the show, looking for something. He asked her "What is it?" She said, "My purse." Using his torch, Nandu searched every seat in the upper stall, and said "Don't worry. I'll try and find it for you." He searched for it again before the 6-O' clock show and found it—just the way it happens in films. Curious, he opened it—scraps of paper, coins, two hair pins, rubber band, soap, kumkum and used Cinema tickets. She came back the next afternoon with a small girl in tow. When he gave her the purse saying "Didn't I tell you, you'd get it", she chuckled in delight and hugged her little friend. Since then, whenever she came to the theatre, she managed to catch his eye. Nandu learnt that her name was Manjari when her friend called out to her one day. Once when she was going back, not able to get tickets, he ran from his post at the entrance to get her the tickets. He was thrilled when she could come to the film on the day of its release. And yet, he hadn't spoken to her nor he tried to find out more about her. Whenever she came to the theatre, his friends would tease him—"There, there she is. Your goods have arrived"—and that for some reason, upset him. She never approached him straight nor did she speak to him. She would vanish in no time as though seeing him was all she wanted. It was the same with him. Every time he had a chance to speak to her, he dodged it saying "Next time." Turning back, seeking him with her eyes, she would disappear. The film heroes change their clothes as well as their horses. Arms wide open, the heroines run up the hillock to hug their heroes. They pledge their undying allegiance to each other through joy and sorrow, life and death. Manjari wakes in

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the night to collect water. Nandu lies awake waiting for the new day to dawn.

The way back from the theatre is full of posters soaking in the thin rain. Coal stoves in dingy little houses. Manjari's mother often opens the cupboard and stares at her possessions—some steel vessels, a couple of dresses glistening among the napthalene balls. The cupboard seems to fear the weddings that are to come. Her father shouts at her for keeping the cupboard open for too long crying, she locks it up safely. If they are invited for weddings, they leave early in the morning and return only after dinner. If they are invited only for the evening, they skip lunch and build up good appetite for dinner. She ties the *rakhi* to the very hands that furtively touch her on the streets. In the dark only a few feet away, her elder brother who had beaten up his wife just a few minutes ago, is now mounted upon her, breathing heavily, stifled by all this, Manjari breathes more easily at the thought of the new spark flitting across Nandu's eyes.

Emerging from the theatre, Nandu wonders about Mahindrakar Chawl till afternoon hoping Manjari would step out to post a letter, buy rations or drop the neighbour's child to school. At times, his eyes light up, more often, he returns to the theatre to let the sun into the matinee show, as usual. Neither is aware of anything beyond this magic that makes their eyes sparkle.

It was the celebration of a jubilee film. All the workers in the theatre were given new trousers and shirts; the stars arrived. On that occasion, Manjari of Mahindrakar Chawl got a special pass. Her blouse was pressed with a makeshift iron; the jasmines in her hair had been carefully preserved from the night before by sprinkling water on them. A hurried meeting near the parked cars, half an hour earlier. He was entrusted with the job of offering "Gold Spot" for the stars, while she enjoyed ogling the stars. In that brief meeting, did their fingers intertwine? Holding hands coyly, did they wonder, laugh or sweat ... ? He vanished; she went in looking for her seat, E-28. They met again during the interval. He waited for her with a big cup of ice cream while she waited for the stars to make their appearance. He called out to her. She walked up to him. Did that handsome boy sitting next to her follow her? No, he walked away. She grabbed the ice cream from his hands and asked, "What about you?" "You have it," he said. She ate it watching the glamorous women all around her. He was hoping she would offer him a spoonful, but she didn't. Hesitantly, his voice nearly inaudible, he asked her "Won't you give me some?" Either she didn't hear him or she possibly did, and yet being lost in the China silks all around her, did not notice; anyhow, she

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finished it. "Can I get you another?" he asked. Preoccupied, she nodded. He ran for the ice cream hoping she'd share it with him this time. By then, people started rushing to their seats. Lest she missed the stars, she said she'd eat it inside. He walked towards the side wings with a funny ache. The manager was screaming at everyone—so he stayed outside till the show ended. Then, she was not seen in the milling crowd nor did he look for her. The next day, it rained, the rain drops rapped on the glass windows. He sat inside watching a Malayalam film even though he did not understand much of it. The plump women in the film provoked him no end. In the evening, he roamed around Mahindrakar Chawl. The film continued to haunt him. She came and he felt strangely relieved. The actual meeting seemed less thrilling than the time before and after meeting. He went back saying "We'll meet tomorrow." Then both of them would fantasize about the next meeting ... She says this and he replies thus; in turn, she says ... then he kisses her and she rests her head on his chest, with her eyes closed ... etc. She turns over to the other side in the rattling rain while he changes his clothes.

The posters speak to each other—"Why don't you buy a red T-shirt for yourself?" "I'd bought flowers for you yesterday. They wilted."

"You always eat out in hotels, what fun?"

"Don't you think of me when you watch good T.V. programmes next door?"

"Why do you wear torn trousers?"

"Just wait until I start my own business."

Nandu is now tired of his routine in the theatre. Surely, there is a life—different and varied—outside Vidarbha and Malhar. He must get out of these repeat shows of the same films. But where, how and why? He wondered while eating in wayside hotels, pressing his clothes by spreading them under the bed and while being manhandled by the rowdies who bought tickets in black. Manjari quietly provided him with the strange inspiration he so needed to leave. Like him, Manjari also wondered while eagerly waiting for the mutton her father brought home annually and while wearing the same clothes, darned over and over again. She floated in the intoxication of his memory as though, he would help her to transcend all this. The way out of a life of sweeping and mopping, 'Sunlight' bar soap and kerosene were dimly visible in the warmth of his company. Yet, both often felt lost, not being able to remember each others faces distinctly.

"Let's elope"—who said this first, was not very clear. But there

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was no doubt that it was said. Even as the words were uttered, their decision got crystallized and they felt the excitement of a new birth. They decided to meet near Jambalinaka and leave together from there. Where to? That they would decide tomorrow. For both, there was the long night until morning. For Manjari, the night was the doorway to a whole new life. For Nandu, it was a night that could arouse the strength in his sinews. She stuffed her good clothes and a saree into a bag and hung it on a nail near the gutter to pick it up while she obstensibly stepped out to fetch milk in the morning. Nandu tried hard to get back the ten rupees he'd lent to the boy working at the soda stall. The salary he'd collected the previous day lay snugly in his pocket. Three hundred rupees should be enough to make his getaway. Then he would work for others till he could set up some business on his own. Inside the theatre, the last show was in progress. The photography in the display window seemed to blink in the empty foyer. Nandu got restless thinking of the infinite possibilities of the morning to come. In her anxiety that she'd be missing out on the TV programmes, Manjari watched all the programmes on TV before she returned home.

The show finished at twelve and the crowd cleared out of the theatre. Nandu checked the seats with his torch. The lonely darkness in the theatre scared him as much as the night that awaited him. He curled up in a corner. Manjari, who woke up at three O'clock once, eased herself and slept again. Nandu, waking at five, had his bath and got out after packing all his possessions into a small, sling bag. Manjari also stepped out of her house at the same time. Both were conscious of how crowded the place was even at that early hour. Reaching Jambalinaka earlier, Nandu waited for a while. He eyed the lorries that were unloading the vegetables in the market square. He saw the sleepy queue near the milk booth. Limping hesitantly, Manjari joined him. Nandu looked around smiling nervously and suggested that they have tea. They walked along the main road adjacent to the lake.

Some young people were already there so early, rowing boats in the lake. As the cool breeze of the dawn blew from the lake, Manjari and Nandu half ran as though distressed by the immense possibilities of their newly-won freedom. He stopped near a way-side tea shop. "I'm famished. I need to eat something," insisted Manjari. So they got into the hotel facing the station and settled down at a rather deserted corner table. Before the waiter arrived, perhaps just to reassure himself, Nandu tried to hug her with his right arm; but failed. Something in her ear rings or necklace poked him. It took them all

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of forty minutes to finish the *Vada-sambar, uppittu, masala dosa* and tea. When Nandu looked at her as they were eating, strangely, he saw only her teeth. For a moment, he felt that they had been there, eating for ages. He hastened her, "Eat soon." In the midst of all the confusion and the *masala dosa*, he tried to ask her "You do love me, don't you?" Manjari only shook her head as if to say "Why bother with it now?" Mother would be up by now. She might have sent her brother to the milk booth to look for her. She gulped the *dosa* down quickly. Nandu paid up and went out. Seeing the pile of roses, she said "Won't you buy me one?". "Later" he snapped at her and joined the queue in the station for the tickets. They had first to get out of Thana. V.T. beckoned him with tremendous power. They would first go to V.T. He naively believed that once they reached V.T. the way ahead would reveal itself. In the lanes of V.T. he had seen a hundred times, Malayalees selling foreign electronic goods in tiny box-like shops. All this vaguely filled him with courage. The queue was long. When Manjari came and stood near him, he chided her in a whisper "Go away and stand there." Now she moved away and stood at a distance. He felt as though all his heroes were chasing him when he himself was unarmed. The posters stuck everywhere in the station seemed to abandon him. In Manjari's eyes that were upon the colour-filled bottles at the fruit vendor's shop at the station's entrance, a new day had begun to dawn. The day which obliterated her whole empire of domestic chores seemed to draw her powerfully. As she stood at a distance, she seemed a stranger to Nandu. Manjari now stood there, unconcerned with what he'd left behind—the dark confused and dream-filled world of the theatre, and what lay in wait for him—the world of V.T. As though released from the shackles of the dream world, Nandu sprang into action. Here, the new day started to shine more brightly than ever in Manjari's eyes. What more could Nandu do, she felt, to this new life that was just unfolding before her, now that she had moved out of skin-deep relations and oily gutters. Nandu now reached the counter and said "V.T.—two tickets." The man asked "Return?" "No, one way" said Nandu. Walking briskly towards Manjari, he stuffed a ticket and some money into her hands, saying "I'll be back soon," he moved into the station. As soon as he was out of her sight, he ran climbing the stairs over the bridge towards platform Number 6. A fast local train was just leaving the station for V.T. He skipped over the steps and latched on, like lightning, to the handle of the speeding train. As soon as he left, Manjari walked out of the Station, with a new strength seeping into her body. She rushed to the flower shop to buy a rose for herself. Wearing it on her hair

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she hurried towards the S.T. Bus-stand and without as much as even finding out where it was going, she got into a bus bound towards the industrial estate.

The city was full of flower shops everywhere. There were posters all around. Having infused each other with the intensity of a new birth, both Manjari Sawanth and Nandakishore Jagthapa now started thinking of each other to forget their fears on the new journey. □

Translated by Vanamala Viswanatha



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AN INVESTIGATION

Vaidehi

THE evening was merging into the night. I had been sitting by the window in the verandah for quite some time without switching the lights on. There was a sound at the gate. It was Babi. Even in my despondent mood, I felt like exclaiming. It was a long time since I had even thought of her before her arrival that day. But as I watched her coming, I felt that I had been seeing her everyday.

Babi came up the steps with the same airs as before. Her gait was quite unlike that of a girl working in a kitchen. It didn't even become her body. With her was a girl around fifteen or sixteen with tightly plaited hair.

She could have been her daughter—a spitting image. A slight improvement here and there. Nose and complexion just like her father's. A curved beak-like nose. May be it was so well-remembered because I had laughed when I saw it for the first and the last time. Even before I could open my mouth, Babi laughed aloud and said, "Oh ... ho ho Kusumakka! I could see you because I came ..." "Come in," I said getting up. "Is your mother at home?" she asked as she came in right behind me. "Is it true that you stay here now? Left your husband? Why? You might have kept it a secret but I found out somehow."

... The same Babi. Hadn't changed a bit. Hadn't matured either. Mouth full of teeth. No discretion in what she said. Not a moment lost between thought and speech. She asked me quite naturally as if she was asking for news about someone else. It didn't touch me at all because it was Babi who had asked or because of the manner of asking. I said nothing and called her in. Even though she was already coming in.

"Who's that?" mother asked from the kitchen. "Babi", I said. "Who?" she asked, though she had heard me, as if to get confirmation. "It's me, Gowrakka, Babi," she said laughing. She had never needed any reason to laugh.

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"Oh, it's you. I could recognise your voice. What a rare visit!" said mother, coming out.

Babi sat down with her daughter next to her. "Gowrakka, this is my daughter, Sumangala. My husband has come too. He has gone to see the fields. I got off here. I am leaving tomorrow." said Babi.

"Did I ask you when you were leaving? Stay on for a few days."

"Stay on? Not this time. The wedding day is approaching. Not much has been done yet."

"Wedding? Whose wedding?"

"This girl's. We found a boy. If we leave him now, who knows what we shall get? We may not even find anyone. That's why we decided to do it off. The responsibility is over at least." Even after such a heavy pronouncement beyond her years, there was nothing in that face. Vanity? Happiness or maturity? Or detachment at least? A kind of a dry face! The same face as it was eighteen years ago. Perhaps age never went past her.

"Why on earth are you getting her married so early?"

"This is the right time. You don't know. Later on they'll start saying this man won't do and that man will. Finally they'll run off with someone or come back as if leaving a game halfway, unable to bear the pressure at the husband's place. Children should be married off before their heads begin to swell up. If you ask me, a couple of babies need to arrive soon. Everything will be alright then."

"A mother of three preaching to a mother of six." The proverb found expression from my mother with a slight smile but did a secret sigh escape as well?

Sometime ago she would answer back without any regard for Babi and succeed in shutting her up. But now she said nothing. Why is mother struck dumb before this worthless Babi, hair full of lice, who had grown up even as she cleaned the floor with cowdung? I was in a mood to shout 'nonsense' but had to go to the kitchen because mother told me with her eyes to make coffee.

The girl must have got up to walk around a bit. "Where are you off to? Jingling your anklets?" I could see Babi pinch her cheeks and pull her back to sit beside her. Mother was a chatterbox while the girl was mute. I poured out the thick decoction from the filter. I could sense mother telling me that it was for Babi. As I mixed a little hot water to make coffee, Kali mooed from the cowshed and so did the calf. "It's time to milk the cow," said mother, getting up. "I'll come too," said Babi following her. Her daughter in tow. "Hey, coffee," I called out. "Very little. Just a couple of spoons," she said. When I told her to drink and go, mother told me to put a lid on it

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and roast a few *papadams*.

"How many milch cows do you have? I have a buffalo. It yields quite well. I sell milk to a few houses without letting my husband know. Taking cash the same day. Who can go around collecting credit? I've had ear studs and nose ring made from the money. And a pair of earrings too for this girl. Do you think, Gowrakka, that we can have all these if we wait for men to have them made for us? We should use our own skill. Aren't I making sense?"

Babi's gong-like voice droned on and on. I wasn't feeling up to roasting *papadams*. Could be done later. After they all came in. I remembered the darkness in the verandah. It seemed more soothing. I sat there, switching off the lights, Babi's voice receded.

Babi, who had left long ago, had come back that day.

The same tough body. Decaying, stained teeth, riding one over another. A brightly coloured ribbon tied to her hair tightly plaited like a mouse's tail. She would buy ribbons, talcum powder and hair clips at festivals. Nagamma would grumble at her shameless parading. With her saree worn a little above the ankle, without a pleat out of place, she would look even more off putting. Even her speech was a riddle. She probably never knew how to give a straight answer. Even though her cracked heels looked disgusting with wedged-in dirt, the only care she would bestow on them would be to smear them at night with some sort of oil she kept in a small copper container.

One day she found a match too. The boy was very tall. A clean, white dhoti, shirt and shawl. Red teeth and lips from chewing betel. Streaks of white here and there in his hair. He married her without seeing her. Babi was furious when she discovered that he was a bride-groom the second time over.

I wasn't married as yet then. Babi, working for my aunt, used to come home to see her mother who was our cook. Nagamma had been sent by my grand mother to help mother. Her husband was a cook. A man who would pull out a burning stick of wood from the stove and chase her when he got angry. Nagamma took her five children along wherever her husband went to cook. Nobody would question her presence. Time wasn't like that then. Nor did she eat for free. She would sweep and clean, wash up and leave for home towards the evening, her mouth stuffed with betel leaves and tobacco. She would visit grandmother often. She would eat there and make tins full of *sandige* and *papadam* to be fried and eaten. She would grind any quantity of rice. People even said that rice and urad daal would jump into water even if she passed by.

Days changed. She became a widow and her head was shaved.

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Then, grandmother sent her to our house. She wore a red saree and a short-sleeved blouse. Later on, she gave up wearing blouses because other widows with red sarees mocked her. Two red sarees a year. Five rupees. A head-shave once a month. Betel nuts and leaves at the town market once a week. Some tobacco.

A short body with swollen legs. But strong as an iron chain. Like tamarind kernel. She slogged on as if it were her own home. But she never told tales or caused misunderstanding. Her hands were clean. If she got angry, she would just lie on her stomach. Grandmother had already said that there would be implicit obedience from her if the supply of betel leaves was kept up. She had lost only a little of her spirit and would go into a trance at times. A couple of pots of water poured over head would set everything right.

Mother remembered just that and managed everything. Whenever Nagamma got into a trance and rolled along the floor, the servants would pour not one but eight potsful of water over her just for fun. Govinda, who used to go to the market would deliberately not fetch betel leaves and tobacco, get her into a frenzied anger and laugh till mother scolded him. When she had her head shaved and came back for a bath, Kollu, the servant, would tease her and say that everything was clean now and Nagamma could be married again. Once when he said this, she had got into a terrible frenzy.

We, the children, were scared spectators. A desire mixed with fear that whatever possessed her should not leave her. After it was all over, she would become, as before, insipid.

Nagamma had been a figure of ridicule, possessed by devils, not getting respect even from her own children. In spite of all this, she had not lost much of her strength. Recently, I thought of her and said to mother that she must be really made of stern stuff. Mother had quickly retorted. Of course, quite unlike you people. I had felt as if my tongue had been pulled out and sliced.

"She didn't run to mother when she had nowhere to go. Today they make such a fuss feeling sorry for themselves. Say what you will, there was a kind of courage when there was no education. Now even that is gone ..." I could hear mother speaking in a low voice as Seetha cleaned the floor. Perhaps mother didn't know that I was in the room sitting with a book near the window. She had said the same thing another time in a slightly different way. "Nagamma had the fight within her to find water where there was none. Wouldn't an ordinary person have gone into her father's shadow making pitiful noises?" But this very mother had told us long long ago that Nagamma had lost her parents. Mother herself might have forgotten it. If reminded,

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she could even say, "In that case, is it a drawback to have support?" I was never afraid of mother even in those times when I would be smacked for wrongdoing. Why am I scared now, even of her silence? Am I even afraid of my own silence that carries on a dialogue with her?

Babi was Nagamma's youngest daughter. Their mother had got all the five of them jobs as cooks in five different houses. All the five were married. None of them was goodlooking and all the gold they had on them was in their ear studs for which they had worked and saved. Mother hasn't to this day given up saying that it was all possible only because Nagamma joined our household.

Babi came home, a mere eight days after her wedding. There were black beads round her neck but no joy on her face. She left her husband in the verandah and came in. She fell at my mother's feet. "Gowrakka, do you know what sort of a man they married me to? Is it enough to have a light skin? He has a wife. She has no children and is deranged. It seems he left her and married me. He has quite a reputation around the town ..." Babi's rough lips and short neck were trembling. But there was no weeping. "I fought anyway. Now he says he is leaving me. Let me see how that happens ..." She seemed to be in a frenzy.

"Don't talk about him with disrespect. After all he is your husband ..." The husband had walked right in as mother said this. He said a few words and looked very theatrical. Babi had accused him of being profligate and both ends of his lips seemed to have melted away in a repulsive manner. When he said he was leaving, mother asked him to have something to drink. He went out saying he would wait outside. Anniah hadn't returned yet. It would be some time before even father came back. Nagamma was shaking her daughter to make a few words drop. They never belonged together. We had not ever seen her sitting and talking to her mother about her joys and sorrows even if she came in for a minute. She would always run around my mother, calling her name. If Nagamma asked her anything, she would throw back an absurd answer as if to someone who was not alright in the head. "Get lost and be damned!" Curses would fly from her mother.

Thus Nagamma, trying to talk to her, made coffee and a spiced dish with beaten rice, according to mother's instructions. She gave it to Babi and came out looking for her husband. He wasn't to be found. "Babi, where is your husband? He is not here." Babi came out instantly throwing some of the savoury stuff into her mouth. "Gone? Where can he go?" She strode straight to the gate like a man and cast her eyes a long way off. "There, there the creature goes ..." Mother

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reprimanded her. "Girl, when do you learn how to speak? Go, Run behind him wherever he goes." "I can't, Gowrakka, I won't sleep with that man ridden with diseases." Her voice trembled with tears but there was none in her eyes.

"With a face like yours, what Prince Charming would arrive?" Who knew what went on in Babi's mind when she looked and saw her mother throwing those words at her from inside the house? She looked back with contempt. "Gowrakka, I know the bus he'll catch. These people go to the bus stand to catch the bus. I shall catch it here. Isn't this the way the bus goes?" she said with determination and stood motionless like a post by the gate, hailed the bus when it arrived and got on to it. As she did so, she kept on gesturing to her mother showing her that her husband was sitting in the front seat. Regardless of whether she found a seat or not, the bus disappeared.

That was when Babi had gone of and she was back now.

Mother must have come in after milking the cow. Babi's voice kept sounding clearer. "How is the father? Does he pamper his daughter?" mother asked. "He thinks the world of her. And me too. Anyway, Gowrakka, who will go near him now? All the tupenny prostitutes have gone off. Now everything is as I say ...!"

Anniah came while I sat in the verandah and listened to her words, though not really wanting to. He stood for a while watching me sitting in darkness. "Nothing has happened that you should be so exercised about. What had to happen, happened. So what? Are you without brains or education? Have you become an old woman? There's still a lot of scope. Appaiah and I—aren't we still there? Get up from there," he said, switching on the light. "Who has come? I can hear voices." I told him who it was. "Nagamma's daughter, Babi. I see," he said walking in. "What are you doing there, girl? Sitting like some devil? Come in." I had already come in when mother called me. "So, Anniah recognized me. Can you say who this is? My daughter, Sumangala. Getting married soon. You must come to the wedding. That's why I came over. My husband will write."

"Wait, wait. Not so fast. Where are you now?"

"Just where I was."

"Where is that?"

"Where I was before?"

"Where were you before?"

"Ah, come on. Don't you know? Gowrakka, doesn't anyone know where I was before? I was in Enygunta."

Anniah laughed aloud. "Enugunta? Where is it?"

"You'll know only if you come over there. Anyway, how many

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functions took place here after I left? I didn't get to know anything at all. If you had told me, my husband would have sent something along."

"Really? How would I know the warmth of feeling between you, husband and wife?"

"Why do you tease her so?" said mother and I remembered the *papadams* and went to the kitchen.

"That's fine, Anniah. You didn't even write to me about your wedding. I believe your wife has just delivered a child ..." Anniah kept on laughing loudly as she went on. The next words came out just as my heart started beating fast.

"Never mind. But it was very wrong not to have told me about Kusumakka's wedding. I didn't know about that either. I just learned about her having left her husband only when I went to visit my big sister ..." Anna wouldn't have laughed then. I could hear him pulling the towel off the line, shake it and go off for a wash. My hands were trembling. I didn't have the strength to hold the pincers as I roasted the *papadams*. This Babi hadn't terrified me so much when she got up the steps. Earlier, Anniah would have brought tears to Babi's eyes and told her to mind her own business. Now, he said nothing. Perhaps he might have thought that there was no point in scolding someone who was here today and gone tomorrow.

"Is that Babi? How are you, child?" said Appaiah as he sat for dinner. "I am well" said Babi in a small voice. Perhaps, in the whole world, her voice would be lowered and lose its investigative quality only before Appaiah. "How is you husband? No more problems?" Babi answered the question in a serious voice. "He is alright. Looks after the family. This is my daughter. She is getting married this Shravana." "I see!" said Appaiah, raising his eyebrows, voice filled with admiration. It was enough to satisfy her. But I couldn't understand what the admiration was for.

All she talked about was her areca plantation, her gold, her husband's prostitutes, the gold jewellery made for her and given away to someone else, her having gone to the other woman's house to bring it back after foul-mouthing, going to a magician and asking him to cast a spell on her husband so he wouldn't visit prostitutes, her husband obeying her implicitly from that day onwards ... Story after story. Babi pulled out a two-stranded gold necklace from her neck as if she had solidified all her happiness in the world and bought it. "See how heavy it is! Six sovereigns. I have quite a few made. I have no complaints. I am happy now," she said though no one had asked her if she was.

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There was a drum of triumph in her voice. The half-witted wife her husband had left didn't really amount to much. She believed things were true if you just told her so. Babi had gone to see her. "There's nothing wrong with her except that she has no children. I showed her my daughter and said she was hers. The woman believed it. I told her that there was no reason for her to stay with her mother. Come with me, I said. She came. Now she stays with me doing house-work. I have less to do now and she too has found a home."

Mother asked provokingly, "Does that mean your husband and she ...?"

Babi was alerted. Moving her hands about, she said. "Would I leave them to it? No way. Moreover, Gowrakka, his hair has gone all white. Body and face are wrinkled." She laughed.

The next moment she said, "But even then, his looks are not straight. Even now he doesn't glance at women without desire. That's why I want to marry off my daughter soon. May be he'll come to his senses when a grandson is born ..." Was she aware where her talk would end up? What was she a mixture of? What did mother feel listening to all this? Mother doesn't tell me her opinions as freely as she used to. I was moving away.

Not becoming insane, I hope.

"Your mother would have been happy is she were alive." mother said.

"I don't know. Who would have looked after her, hand and foot? It's just a well that she died." I felt nauseated.

"A spirit used to possess your mother. You are a devil to yourself," said mother and just left.

I kept sitting in the armchair. She might catch hold of me, I thought, about to get up slowly.

"What's this, Kusumakka? You don't talk at all. Are you not friends with me any more?" As she came nearer and nearer saying that, her clothes changed. She was wearing a black coat and a whiter turban. There was a bundle of records under her arm. She kept on coming towards me.

I wasn't on an armchair. I was in a cage. My head started reeling. Without understanding what is was all about, I stood up holding on to the dock.

The investigation continued.

"Anyway, why did you leave your husband? Was he a drunkard, was he unfaithful to you, or did he beat you ...?"

"..."

"Why do you look at me like that? Am I a doll? Or a devil? You

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used to be such fun before. Where has it all gone now?"

"Have you become so depressed just because you left your husband? What about his people ... ? If we are good, they are good too. What do you say?"

Sweat was dripping from my body.

"How hot it is here even though it is raining!" she said, pulling out a handkerchief from her coat pocket, wiping her face and bending over.

"Anyway, why did you run away from your husband? If so many of them disliked only you, then something must be wrong with you ... How can we find out if you don't answer at all?"

"..."

"The last question: Did you come off yourself or did he leave you ...? Or did they all get together and break you up ...?"

Babi asked three questions, turning in three directions, standing in three different postures and in three different voices.

I looked all around once. The court was full of people. Even blinking could be heard in the silence. In the front row, looking at me without blinking, Appaiah, Amma, Anniah and Nagamma and Sumangala too. They were bent forward as if to suck every word of my answer.

Behind the door, the idiot wife stood shrinking, saree across her mouth, body and face all wrinkled.

No. There was no one from the 'other' side. There was no one to listen to my answer.

I must answer, regardless. I was about to answer, all the words queuing up, about to rush forward as sentences. From the bottom of the throat to the tip of my tongue. Then ...

Suddenly I felt suspicious and turned towards the seat of justice. There was just an empty chair there. Even that was about to crumble, eaten up by termites.

The mind became a flat sea which had forgotten to roar.

All the sounds standing in readiness for the grim dance, withdraw.

A sudden darkness enveloped the whole courtroom. □

Translated by Padma Ramchandra Sharma

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An Old Pair Of Shorts

Mogalli Ganesh

"NO. He's got to wear his shorts. What will the wedding guests say if they see his bare buttocks?"

Nagaraja went on as stubbornly as his little son would have done. Unmindful of the other kids who pranced about happily, Nagaraja's son Seeni was busy dipping his hand in a water-drum in the backyard. "Come on! you fucking loafer! Cover your shame with a pair of shorts." Nagaraja yelled out. The voice was loud and audible even amidst the noise of the wedding house.

"Whatever is the matter. Why all this fuss?" demanded Nagaraja's wife rolling her eyes in all directions, as though something awful had happened. "What happened to this fellow's shorts, woman? Where has he thrown them?" Nagaraja sounded agitated. "How am I to know where his shorts are? I didn't see them." She retorted moving away towards the room. Nagaraja's bile rose to his head. "All you know is how to give birth", he blurted out in the presence of all the wedding guests. "And what do you know apart from getting me pregnant, you dirty fellow?" Siddi challenged him feeling humiliated. The wedding guests who bustled about happily paid little heed to this event. But Nagaraja was obsessed with the idea of making his son wear the shorts though he didn't know where they were.

"Can't you attend to your only son—clean his nose, put on his shorts and smarten him up at least for today?" commented Nagaraja's sister Puttatayi, just then, giving vent to all her anger and frustration at not getting a saree for the wedding. "You have married not one or two, but three wives already but haven't got any wiser. What a bloody life! I wonder if you people will ever learn anything at all!"

The wedding house was full of friends and relatives. Grandmas sat in a corner discussing the splendour of weddings of their times, the rituals, the food, the guests, and the beauty of the wedding songs teasing

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the in-laws. They recalled a beautiful world of weddings and spoke regretfully, of dowry and non-observance of wedding rituals by modern brides and grooms.

In the meanwhile, Nagaraja came to where the old women sat, looking for his son's shorts. "Are my son's shorts anywhere here, mothers?" he asked them. "How can you look for a pair of shorts in a wedding house, son? They must be around somewhere. Who would want to take them?" said one of the old women picking up her betel-nut bag. But Nagaraja went away without heeding her words. Having finished the wedding ceremony in the groom's village, all the guests had come, along with the groom, to the bride's house. The boy and his friends had locked themselves up in a room and were in a jolly mood.

"Oh, are you here, Nagaraja? I was wondering where you had disappeared to. Go and fetch a couple of drums of water on the bicycle" said someone who came looking for Nagaraja.

"Listen, how can I do it now? I'll look like a woman if I walk to the well carrying that rope. There are so many of you women here! Why don't one of you go and get the water?" said Nagaraja irritated. "You'd better leave whatever you are doing and find the boy's shorts first. Otherwise this wedding lunch is going to be your funeral meal," he yelled out a warning to Siddi.

"That's all your foul mouth can ever speak. Forever nagging me to look for something. Why don't you go look for them yourself?" she grumbled. Enraged by this, Nagaraja pulled his wife by the hair and gave her a few solid blows. Siddi kept mum lest this shameful scene should reach the ears of the bridegroom, but spat on Nagaraja's face making angry gestures. Meanwhile Nagaraja's father had come to witness the scene.

"Tut, you impotent bastard. Are you drunk?" Having scolded his son in this manner he inquired of his eldest grand daughter, Gowri! "What crime has she committed that he beats her like this?" "Ayyo! They've been carrying on like this for sometime now. Their little fellow isn't wearing his shorts. 'Put them on, woman, put them on' he says. 'Ayyo, I don't know where they are. He must've thrown them somewhere in the backyard when he went to shit' she says, and they are fighting over that" she explained.

"Couldn't you keep off quarreling at least today? Isn't this how you ruined my house and reduced it to dust?" Nagaraja's 80 year old father lamented the plight of his family as usual. He called out to his little grandson, Seeni and told his grand-daughter Gowri, "Find the lad's shorts and get him to wear them, dear." "What does it matter if he doesn't wear them grandpa?" querried the girl. "Ayyo, he must've

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got them drenched and flung them somewhere" declared Siddi from inside the room. "Do they have to be those very shorts?" asked Gowri irritated. "Two pairs were all he had. He lost one earlier, just like this. I don't know where he removed this pair" Siddi replied in a huff.

"If you don't have a pair, why not borrow one pair from Kariya?" Gowri suggested. "You think he will lend his shorts? And that his mother will allow him to? What a racket there was the last time this fellow wore her son's shorts!" exclaimed Siddi wiping her tears.

Nagaraja continued to stand there grimly throughout the scene. His first wife had died during child-birth. The second one had run away, finding life with him unbearable. Siddi was the third. Nagaraja wasn't a man of any repute in the village. At twenty-eight, he had already married his third wife, but had just one son, Seeni. Unlike the other villagemen of his age, he never strained his body with hard work nor washed his hands in sweat. He didn't even carry on the hotel job his father had taught him. He found greater satisfaction in repairing radios, watches and other odd things, a job which he did quite badly. He had spent all his life in this peculiarly irresponsible manner. He had lost his baby girl and the first two wives in this manner.

Nagaraja's son Seeni possessed only two pairs of shorts. The shorts which eluded everyone's eyes and hands and compelled him to stay bare-bottomed was the pair his aunt had bought him at the fair. "What a wretched life mine has been" thought Siddi as she searched every nook of the backyard in vain for the shorts—the root of her present problem and the source of her grouse against her father at the wedding. He hadn't stitched her son a pair of shorts for the wedding.

"Tut! you can't stay in peace for a single day in this bloody house. I wonder what *Karma* of mine brought me here." Just as she was thinking on these lines, the bride, Shanti, wondering how they could quarrel like this on the happiest day of her life, said "What is this aunt? You've been at it since this morning! What'll the guests think of you? Won't they laugh at you and say 'Look at the wretched life they lead?'

"Ayyo! why do you bother about all that. You're going to your husband's house. I hope you'll be happy at least ..."

Though Shanti didn't want to worry her head over this, she too was affected by a kind of depression. "None of them is happy at my wedding. May be things wouldn't have been this way if my mother were alive. This wretched father of mine is never without a toddy-mug

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in his hand. He pitches his tent wherever there's a toddy shop and keeps hoping to find a woman, who'll marry him. The land he owns is no bigger than his loin cloth and he's mortgaged even that. He doesn't work, doesn't give the family a paisa and wanders from village to village in search of a bride. At fifty, after having had three wives he is busy looking for a fourth one. Every one in the family is angry and disgusted with his wild behaviour. That may be the reason why they are not taking any interest in my marriage." She heaved a long sigh.

"Why was I born to such a father? My uncle Nagaraja too has had three wives. But my father's wives drowned or hanged themselves because they couldn't bear his torture. And now the man is set on his fourth marriage. And at this age, he is nagging his father to look for a bride for him. Oh Siva! What more do I have to witness for being born his daughter?" she thought. Though sorrow filled her heart, she sat quietly in a corner afraid of inviting comments from the groom's people.

The pair of shorts couldn't be traced at all. Nagaraja's temper grew worse and he started behaving like a lunatic flying at everyone for no particular reason. He pounced on Seeni, contendedly playing in mud, all by himself, beat him till the boy's back bore the mark of his hand and dragged him in. The lad's screams, loud enough to bring the roof down, sent shivers through the wedding guests. Seeni, terrified because he didn't know why he was being beaten, started dribbling at once and wailed even more. Siddi came running out of the room yelling "Ayyo! Are you going to kill the only son we have, you wretch? What's got into you? Let go off him. Why do you torment me like this?" and tried to rescue the boy from him. When Nagaraja shoved her against the wall the coloured bangles in her hand broke into pieces and blood started oozing out of the cuts caused by the splinters.

All the women in the wedding house besieged Nagaraja and rescued Seeni from him. The poor little boy grew more terrified as he witnessed the scene of the battle. Afraid that his father might actually kill him if he opened his mouth again, he swallowed his tears, pain and terror. His hands sought the painful marks on his back and his red eyes, brimming with tears, looked like live cinders. He hid himself in the pleats of an old woman who sat nearby.

Still in a temper, Nagaraja went after Siddi intending to bash her up. Siddi crossed the big hall and ran out of the back door. While all this went on, the bridegroom remained behind closed doors in his room, eating his lunch. He was either too embarrassed or attri-

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buted the quarrel to some slight misunderstanding. "Something of this sort has to happen on every such occasion in this house" thought Shanti anxiously. Fearing some calamity, she ran out of the wedding house to the next street and fetched her grandfather after informing him of Nagaraja's exploits.

The old woman in the meanwhile decided it was better for the poor lad, Seeni to disappear from the scene to buy himself something and sent him away with a four anna coin. Though Seeni, tortured by terror and blows didn't really want the money, welcomed the idea of getting away from the scene and walked off to the shop with the four anna coin.

Nagaraja's father who came charging, said in the most dejected manner "Why did you have to be born my children? You won't let me spend even my last days in peace. I took so much trouble—even mortgaged my house and farm—to arrange a marriage which the man who fathered the girl should've done. How can you, without shouldering a single responsibility, behave like this now at such a time? How could God create the likes of you? Oh Lord! Rama! Rama! How I wish I could go far far away from here and not witness these things."

Nagaraja retorted even before he could complete his words. "Get lost, you son of a bitch. You didn't give me a paise when I demanded my share of the property and left everything to your eldest son, Chikkaida, instead. Don't you now claim you did this and that for us! Don't I know? Have you given me a single paisa out of the ten thousand rupees you have spent on the wedding? Did you stitch my son a pair of shorts even? But when that eldest son of yours, who is 53 and has grand children already and wants to marry a fourth wife, you consent to it as if you don't know anything at all."

"Ayyo ... Ayyo .. Please speak softly, Nagaraja, I beg you with folded hands. Don't you know the bridegroom is in the room next to this? Have you considered what might happen when they come to know the girl's father is marrying a fourth wife? It is only because the poor girl is motherless and has this fellow for a father that I mortgaged my house and farm to get her married, not for my own happiness! I beg you, hold your tongue till the wedding is over ..." he appealed to his son. One or two fellows from the groom's party who noticed this came up to Nagaraja and said "Come on, Nagarajappa! Why talk about all that now. You can do it later, come on!" When they tried to pull him away from there Nagaraja freed his hand and flew at them. "Look, why don't you leave us alone? This business concerns only our family. We have given you our girl and

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you are taking her. This business has nothing to do with you. Get off." The bride, Shanti came running and fell at his feet.

"Uncle! Uncle! Please, I beg you! Don't say anything today. I'll have my brother, who is in school now, give you the ten thousand spent on my wedding, when he starts earning. Please stay quiet! If the groom, disgusted with the kind of life we lead, walks off saying he'll have nothing to do with us, who will I marry then?"

But Nagaraja went on without heeding her.

"Oh! Let me be, Shanti. I know what to do. It would have been alright if that loafer father of yours was alright. Just let him come back. We'll clinch the issue today in this very wedding house. That bastard who calls himself your grandfather mortgages the farm to get ten thousand rupees and without his knowledge your father borrows two thousand rupees from the Gowda mortgaging the backyard, makes merry and gets drunk with the money. Just let him come. He shall not cross this threshold again without giving me my share of the land. I'll make that clear to him." With these words he came to the veranda, his jaws set in determination. Nagaraja's father felt utterly helpless. "In my eighty years, I've got all the children married, performed every ceremony and feast for the dead and the living. I used to live like a lord before these wretched children of mine ruined the family. I can't go away and live someplace else because there's no strength left in my hands. These children won't let me live here in peace. I hate to think what'll happen when Chikkaida comes home. How can anyone kick up such a row over a miserable pair of shorts? Even if I give them their share of property, they'll sell it off to the same Gowda within a day. What advice can I give these fellows? They've dragged my family honour to the streets. What'll people say if we keep a grown up grand daughter at home? There was little chance of her father getting her married. They don't care to understand my action. Instead they've turned this wedding house into a battle field using the pair of shorts as an excuse." He muttered sinking against the wall.

"Shanti, my child, will you get me some water?" he called out.

Shanti's face had darkened. "Siddi ran out of the backdoor and isn't back yet" she whispered in her Grandpa's ear as she handed him the water. 'Whatever could have happened to Siddi, I wonder! What if she has jumped into a well or a tank seeing her death was never more than a few feet away? Oh! Why have all my people turned out this way?' Anxiously he gulped down the water and got hold of Chamappa's son, Kariya. He gave him a bicycle and pleaded "Please go and look for our Siddi."

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The wedding house appeared like a graveyard. Relatives commented to each other about everyone. "All kinds of things have happened. Once we are through tomorrow, Shanti goes to her house. Let them fight it out afterwards," they concluded.

Sitting at the end of the veranda, one foot resting on the other, Nagaraja lighted a beedi and took a deep puff. The smoke went past the faces of several who sat there. As the smoke he exhaled filled the place, someone ran in shivering and addressed the people sitting there in a sorrowful voice. "Ayyo, your Seeni has been run over by a lorry, near the Circle. Come on," he wailed. This unexpected piece of news about Seeni broke everyone's heart. All of them rushed to the Circle.

Nagaraja jumped up with a 'Ha' and charged as if his whole body was reduced to pulp. A huge crowd gathered at the Circle. All one could hear were the sounds of regret people made. Nagaraja fainted when he saw the mangled body of his son. There was no sign of Siddi. "Ayyo! my child! what a death you died" Nagaraja's father wailed, his eyes brimming with tears. When he went to pick up the blood-soaked body in his arms, someone stopped him. The sight of those tender legs without shorts mashed up to the hips, moved every heart. The old woman who had given him the four-anna coin and sent him to eat something, was filled with a sense of sin. She fell on Seeni's face and sobbed "Ayyo, little child!" The upper half of the stomach was still intact. Three of the green parrot-shaped biscuits he had bought with the four annas were strewn on the ground while two more remained clutched in his hand. Seeni's big, black eyes half-open, seemed to stare at his father in fear.

Someone in the crowd explained "He had been standing here for a long time when I said to him 'Go Seeni, join the wedding'. And he said 'My father will beat me' and continued to stand there sobbing. Just then, the lorry came fast and ran over him." The speaker too joined the silence.

Shanti's father Chikkahaida appeared from somewhere having heard the news. "It's all Nagaraja's doing. No one else is to blame" he muttered rolling his drunken eyes towards Nagaraja's unconscious body. The wedding guests stood, looking lost. Shanti's husband began to wipe his eyes with a handkerchief. □

Translated by Laxmi Chandrashekar

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THE ARREST

Nataraj Huliyar

DR BETTE Gowda came to know of the sudden arrest of Sadashiva Reddy when a man's trembling voice, too frightened to identify itself, told him on the phone that the police had taken him away when he was waiting in the park for his girlfriend. Two thoughts occurred to Bette Gowda's mind at once as he inexplicably started shivering. One: Sadashiva had it coming for long time. Two: What was he to do now?

Bette Gowda's fear of the police was so strong that someone seemed to be pulling him back when he considered what step he should take next. He had heard about the "pleasures" of jail life from his close friends who had been arrested some seven or eight years ago during the Emergency. However, it struck him that he was in a totally different situation. When he recalled that Nagaraja, who had been a close friend of his and Sadashiva Reddy's, was in the Intelligence Bureau, his fear gave way to relief. He phoned up a couple of journalist-friends and left a message that they should call him back in the evening. He left a note on the table for his wife Gaura, rummaged through his diary, took out a visiting card and put it in his pocket. When he came out of the house, the sun was scorching. There was no activity on the streets; the city too seemed to be paralysed with fear.

It was a fifteen-minute walk to Nagaraja's office. Bette Gowda was sure Nagaraja would show him some way out. The three of them had met when Bette Gowda was in his third year in medical college. He would scribble poem after poem—he had delusions of being a great poet—and take them in his shirt pocket to a literary society where Sadashiva and Nagaraja were also members. Sadashiva was in the first year of his law course. Nagaraja was pursuing his M.A. in sociology. It was their interest in poetry, socialism and Marxism that had linked them together.

Sadashiva Reddy was Bette Gowda's hero in those days. He had a thick moustache and a French beard, something Bette Gowda longed to

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have but couldn't no matter how hard he tried. He would speak in a hypnotic manner, in a style Bette Gowda wished to cultivate but couldn't. Bette Gowda and Nagaraja would gaze admiringly at Sadashiva's longish face, sharp nose and unkempt hair as he spoke, his bloodshot eyes staring blankly into space. For his part, Bette Gowda would be too absorbed in his hero even to blink or say something in response.

Sadashiva's talk would jump from poetry to life in the slums, from life in the slums to fiction, from fiction to Marxism, from Marxism to Naxalism. Nagaraja would put forth his own counter arguments from time to time. "You say the landlords must be shot. What after that? The landlord's son will take to the same lifestyle ... his brother too will continue the same system. What will you do then? We can change things only through peaceful means," he would say, eclipsing Sadashiva for a short while. But Sadashiva would recover and shine soon enough. His sharp remarks would endear him to Bette Gowda again. Nagaraja always boiled with rage at Sadashiva's extremist theories. But at the end of it all, the three friends would drink tea at a *kaka* shop and, if they had some extra money, eat a few slices of bread, and if they still had some money left, drink some cheap beer at an unlicensed bar beyond the gutter at the end of Chamaraja Road. They would then go home separately.

After completing his medicine course, Bette Gowda opened a nursing home near the Annadorai slum and became popular within a short time. Nagaraja passed some exam and became an intelligence officer. Sadashiva disappeared for three years after he told his friends about his plans to start a legal practice. When he reappeared, they saw him frequenting the slum in front of the nursing home. Bette Gowda often felt envious that people in the slum cared less for him, even though he had so much concern for them as a doctor, than for Sadashiva, who would go from hut to hut and sip tea, sitting with his back to the flimsy wall.

It had been about two years since Sadashiva came to this place. And now ...

2

"Wait here," the sentry told Bette Gowda brusquely in his Tamil-accented Kannada before he went up the steps and into Nagaraja's office. He came back within a minute. "You can see Nagaraja saheb," he said a little softly and returned to stand at attention near the door. A pretty girl in a salwar kameez came hopping down the stairs, taking two steps at a time, as Bette Gowda walked

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up. It must be this clever fellow Nagaraja's handiwork, he thought a little enviously as he noticed her flushed face and the colour in her cheeks. Her enthusiasm unsettled him. He stepped into the room with a plate announcing the name of N.S. Nagaraja Rao and saw the smiling face of the same old Nagaraja. But the very next moment, Bette Gowda thought he could detect a slight tightening up in Nagaraja's face.

"Welcome to the great, popular social worker and king of healers, Dr Bette Gowda," Nagaraja said in his usual joking, theatrical manner, but Bette Gowda suspected the greeting had a hint of sarcasm in it somewhere. "Sit down, *dore*. Why are you still standing?" Nagaraja said. As soon as Bette Gowda sat down, he added: "I know why you have come." Bette Gowda was put off at once by Nagaraja's detective style; the police air assailed him.

"All right. I have nothing to say if you already know ..." Bette Gowda placed his elbow on the table and looked straight at Nagaraja. He could almost see on Nagaraja's face the conceit of the kiss the girl must have given him a few moments before. Bette Gowda felt like slapping him on the back in the usual chummy manner and telling him half congratulatingly and half enviously. "So you've caught some pretty bird, *behnchot*" But for some reason, the words just wouldn't come out. He felt a little afraid of Nagaraja. Not knowing how to start, and regretting not having jotted down what he wanted to say, he slowly opened his mouth and spluttered. "Coming to the point ..." Even before he could complete the sentence, Nagaraja cut him off with a cold, "Better drop the point ..." The commanding tone in his voice unnerved Bette Gowda.

A few minutes later, Bette Gowda said, "I have not come to ask you to get him released. I just want to know ..." But he found again that he just couldn't complete his sentences. "If you try to find out now, the department will be interested in finding out why you want to know. If the department comes to know you are interested in him, it will immediately become interested in you. It won't hesitate to use its methods ... anything from the roller to the aeroplane ... to make you speak out."

Bette Gowda was shaken to hear his dear friend talk so coldly. "You people keep quiet when these fellows shoot whoever they think are the upper class, even women and old man, but your civil liberties consciousness comes alive when we catch them," Nagaraja thundered. Bette Gowda broke out in a sweat and swallowed hard. It suddenly stuck him that he was helpless.

The next moment he felt so angry he wanted to lift the flower

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pot from the table and smash it on Nagaraja's head. He began to shake visibly as he tried hard to control his anger. Nagaraja seemed to sense this and softened down a little. "You don't understand. People like him disturb the system. They hatch schemes to uproot the existing system. What are you doing with people like him ..." When Bette Gowda saw his friend return to his old seminar manner, he recovered a little and asked hopefully. "All the three of us agree that the system should change, don't we?"

"This is no time to shake up the system, dear fellow. These are anti-social people. Have you read his latest poem?" Nagaraja picked up a file marked 'S' from his drawer, pulled out a creased magazine clipping and thrust it at Bette Gowda's face. There were some six or seven lines on the torn, crumpled sheet :

There is an earth-scorching fire
in the red of their eyes.
They've lost their breath,
and they've lost their voice.
Yet they will explode in flames,
Yet they will cleave the skies ...

The rest of the lines were not clear. Bette Gowda could discern the name of Sadashiva Reddy at the end of the poem only when he peered at the sheet closely. He read the poem again, but didn't speak. He couldn't imagine why a poem like this should worry Nagaraja or his system. Nagaraja noticed the puzzlement on Bette Gowda's face and spoke: "These bastards write such damned stuff and disturb the system. They incite the poor who would otherwise quietly be earning their gruel and create law and order problems ..."

Bette Gowda burst out laughing. He couldn't control his laughter at this intelligence officer's ignorance in believing that people would rise in rebellion by reading poems. Nagaraja the friend suddenly became Nagaraja the police officer. He knitted his brow and said in a grave tone." Do you know how he spits fire at the ruling party in which all of us have so much hope?" Bette Gowda too had felt that Sadashiva Reddy was being too harsh on the ruling party which had many sensitive leaders who believed, like himself, in the leftist ideology. "But ..." he began. Nagaraja interrupted him in an amicable but admonishing tone. Don't bother about him," he said and added in English, "Be happy, be cool."

It struck Bette Gowda that they had been referring to Sadashiva Reddy as "he" without mentioning his name even once. If Nagaraja hadn't uttered his name it was perhaps because of the arrogance that

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came to him from sitting in his swivel chair. As for himself, Bette Gowda could only blame his own timidity. He swallowed again and mumbled, "So ..."

"Better keep away. You can never tell how these things turn out ... If you can stay for an hour I can come out with you. We can go have a drink," Nagaraja winked and smiled. It was reassuring for Bette Gowda to see that Nagaraja the policeman could smile like this. "Shall I try some more persuasion?" Bette Gowda wondered and then decided there was no point in trying any further. "Not in the mood today, sorry. I'm going. See you," he said and got up. The sentry smiled familiarly when he came down the stairs. Bette Gowda tried to smile back, but flinched. He remembered an incident that came to his mind whenever he saw a policeman.

It must have been in 1973. There was some strike in the campus, and there were policemen all over. Bette Gowda hadn't become a doctor yet; he was just a student. He was quietly enjoying a cup of coffee when he suddenly fancied a beedi smoke. He borrowed a beedi from one of the constables walking about there. He was lighting it from the beedi the constable was holding in his teeth when they heard the smashing of a classroom windowpane. The very next moment came the piercing order, "Charge."

On hearing this, Shanthanna, the friendly policeman of a moment ago, stiffened up as Bette Gowda was about to immerse himself in the pleasure of the smoke. The policeman pulled out the lathi from his side and, half closing his eyes and clenching his teeth, started thrashing Bette Gowda, ignoring his protestations of "Sir ... swami ... I ... just now ... beedi." Bette Gowda had run out, jumped over the wall and somehow managed to escape.

Bette Gowda thought the sentry who was smiling at him could well have been the constable who had beaten him up. Even otherwise, the sentry's friendliness could turn to terror any instant. There was another tremor in his heart when he recalled how police-lines had formed on Nagaraja's calm face a few minutes ago. Hoping to meet his journalist friends, he walked on and reached the office of *The Times*. His friends had left the office an hour ago. He consoled himself that he was doing something even in such evil circumstances.

3

Bette Gowda returned home just as it began to get dark. Gaura, who was busy these days teaching, A for apple and other lessons to their son Siddhartha so that he could join a convent school, had set

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aside this duty and was waiting anxiously for him. She fell into his arms with the relief of seeing him. "Do you know how scared I was?" She said. Bette Gowda smiled. "You don't understand, these are bad times..." she continued innocently, but Bette Gowda just smiled again.

When she continued in the same vein, he got up and went to the adjoining room. Gaura started sniffing. She is always like this, he thought. She couldn't stand Sadashiva Reddy coming over at odd hours and talking with him for long hours. She would take out her ire by flinging the cooking vessels about, beating up little Siddhartha, slamming doors and tearing up the newspapers.

Sadashiva had felt pained when he sensed her resentment. "I don't want to spoil your life. You have a wife who loves you dearly," he had said, pressing Bette Gowda's hand, without any trace of sarcasm, and walked out of the house. This had incensed Bette Gowda so much that he didn't speak to his wife for three days after that.

It was not as though Bette Gowda hadn't asked himself why he should associate with Sadashiva Reddy after setting up a clinic. His liberalism was so different from the extremism of the firebrand Sadashiva Reddy. He was a peace-loving man, a Gandhian. He had consoled himself that his growing intolerance of Sadashiva Reddy had ideological reasons. Just a few days ago, hadn't he humbly agreed with the socialist professor with the white beard who had said, "This Sadashiva Reddy has no love of life. He's an extremely destructive fellow."

Or was it his own timidity that had made him try to run away from Sadashiva Reddy when he couldn't even make out whether he was violent or non-violent? He knew Sadashiva found some comfort only in his company. Sadashiva was very lonely even though he spent so much time in the midst of people. "You find what I tell you thrilling, but you can never imagine how miserable I find this life of humiliation and loneliness," he had confided in Bette Gowda a couple of times. Bette Gowda marvelled at Sadashiva Reddy's ability to keep smiling when he should have been burnt out by the fire of the revolutionary's loneliness. As for himself, he recalled that he wasn't willing to suffer such agony even for a single day.

When Bette Gowda was still a student, the two friends had enthusiastically joined a socialist group and gone to campaign in a village. They spouted nothing but big words when they opened their mouth. No one in the village stopped to listen to their strange talk as they walked up and down the lanes. If some did stop, they wouldn't pay heed to the revolutionary speeches the boys were making. Even if they did nod, they wouldn't believe them. If they appeared to have

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believed the two friends, they would soon belie this impression by joining their hands contemptuously to say goodbye. "Yes, that's all very fine. Go now."

The two friends had felt so frustrated at the end of the very first day that they had cycled back the fifteen miles and gone off to a tired sleep in their room. Unable to bear the unwanted feeling, Bette Gowda had vowed never ever to look that way again. But Sadashiva Reddy had overcome this orphaned feeling and carried on. The newspapers dubbed him anti-Dalit when he jumped into the farmers' movement, and anti-farmer when he joined the Dalit movement. The government's schemes to break even peaceful movements baffled Sadashiva Reddy. Was it this bafflement that provoked him in recent days to thunder, "These dirty governments must be bombed!" The police just wrung their hands helplessly at their inability to touch him as long as he participated in Gandhian style agitations. But they had become alert immediately after he made speeches in the Naxalite manner: "Nothing will change unless blood is shed ..."

Even though Sadashiva Reddy spoke about violence, he had many apprehensions about it. When a Naxalite friend hid a gun in his room, the usually brash Sadashiva had shivered a little. He sweated profusely as the bhang-smoking boy described how he had taken to the gun: "I have started shooting, comrade. The very first day I learnt to pull the trigger, I shot a white pigeon on the tree in front. At my third aim I shot a cat sitting on the window ledge. I went on shooting ... men, women who raised their hands and came in the way, children ... My fingers itch if I don't shoot something. I want to keep shooting all the time." Sadashiva Reddy and I had listened tremblingly as the fiery youth went on as though his very soul had been burnt out.

Recently, after Sadashiva started going about with a Malayali girl he had said, "I am reading a lot of Gandhi these days. Do you have anything by him?" He had rummaged in the cupboard with a mad new enthusiasm and taken out all the books by Gandhi which Bette Gowda had collected but not read. Bette Gowda had felt very happy to know that Sadashiva, who had always suffered from an orhpaned feeling, had at last found the love of a girl. Sadashiva had gained a lot of self-confidence in her company. He had forgotten his raging poems and written love songs like this :

They sing songs :
my girl's blue eyes.
They sing songs.
They heal the cancer wounds :

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eating up my heart.
They heal the cancer wounds.

Bette Gowda had seen the dark, beautiful girl, who sometimes came to the slum with Sadashiva, only a couple of times. Sadashiva and the girl had decided to get married in a simple ceremony in the slum next month. To think that the police had dragged away this Sadashiva Reddy when he was waiting eagerly for his girl ...

4

The third day after Sadashiva Reddy was arrested, Bette Gowda stood in a queue from eight in the morning to get his son, who he hoped would realise all his dreams, admitted in convent school. At four in the evening, he was finally successful. He passed by the jail on his way back, and thought he might at least look in and talk to Sadashiva. His legs started shaking, something that had never happened before. "You don't know the police ..." he remembered what his friends had told him. He recalled how he had woken up with a start the previous night. The sharp looks of the armed sentries seemed to pierce his heart. He walked away and reached home.

He thought he should at least write a protest letter in the readers column of the papers. He wrote out three or four drafts but struck them out. He took the sheets and tore them into small bits. After a while he picked up all the bits, heaped them together and set fire to the heap.

It occurred to him that he could call up the press and got up to dial the number. The fear that his phone might be tapped crossed his mind and he pulled back abruptly. He thought he should at least find out about the Malayali girl, but recoiled when he realised that the police would be after her too. The steel-vessels-for-old-clothes man Shafi Ahmed's son, Sadiq, who had studied upto B.A., came to Bette Gowda with a protest memorandum which already had several signatures on it. "Come tomorrow. I'll read it properly and then sign it," he told him, patted him on the back and sent him away with a few words of praise.

"I must do something at least tomorrow," he told himself as he considered hiring a lawyer and filing a case. He rolled restlessly from side to side on his bed. He felt drowsy after a while, but every few minutes he woke up with a start, breaking out in a sweat even though it was cold outside. His legs wouldn't stop shaking; Gaura had to finally pat him to sleep.

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The next morning, there was a small item in *The Times* saying that police were forced to shoot an extremist called Sadashiva Reddy in an encounter when he was trying to escape from police custody. The report also said the body of Sadashiva Reddy had been sent for post-mortem. Just below the report was the condolence message of a socialist minister.

Bette Gowda was weighing the pros and cons of giving a condolence message to the press when a friend, who worked in a newspaper, called him up: Don't do anything silly like giving a statement. It's a very sensitive issue. He thanked the friend and put the phone down. He could hear some activity outside. When he stepped out of the door he noticed that the people of the slum, who had already read about the death in the Tamil papers, were preparing to take out a procession. He could see that Sadiq was moving about, busily organising the protest. He spotted the Malayali girl's face in the crowd. He tried to read the thoughts on the face from where he was standing. He couldn't—she was too far from him. □

Translated by Ramakrishna

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BAIL SAHEBA

Vivek Shanbhag

IT was to his own father that Dayananda had first provided bail. He was twenty two years old then. He was struggling to clear his final year B.A. exam after failing in the first two attempts. Dayananda felt like taking up a job whenever he heard his graduate-friends, on leave from their jobs, discuss their pay scales, DA, PL, CL and problems of finding proper food—while away from home. His attempts to find a job through acquaintances always met with their sweet assurances that they would certainly help him find one, once he had his degree. Dayananda's father Kamalakar was the owner of a Garment shop once famous all over Karwar. The shop was next to the bus stop on the way to the harbour. People from nearby villages always flocked to Kamalakar's store shopping for wedding garments. Kamalakar would go himself two or three times every year to Bombay, to choose the garments and fix their price. Umbrellas of various colours would be up for sale, just before the rainy season. As soon as the umbrellas came in, Mohan, the goldsmith next door would start his 'racket' of inscribing names in silver on their interiors.

The shop, that was thriving and always with customers, however, started losing all its life right before Kamalakar's eyes. The fortunes of the shop shifted once Kamalakar—after being lured into the habit of gambling with cards with Kamat-teacher and his gang—started relegating responsibilities to his younger brothers to go to Bombay to purchase garments, handing over all finances to them. To make matters no better, the old bus stop was shifted to another place for reasons of space when buses from other parts started coming to Karwar directly. As if the soul of the market shifted along with the bus stand, the market began to grow now in the direction of the new bus stand. The dazzling lights of the new stores drew the customers from the old shops to themselves. Umbrellas now became available all over the place. In that rainy season Kamalakar's shop was left with sixty umbrellas after managing to sell

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only forty. Umbrellas of the same kind became available for three rupees less at other shops. Kamalakar had gone bankrupt even before he could realise what was happening. He had neither accounts of the dues nor cash balance whatsoever. Far from buying new clothes he had to dispose goods from previous years. The display windows, till then adorned with clothes of such colours became empty. Empty cupboards and long wooden poles, once wound with yards of cloth now filled the corners of the shop. Kamalakar abandoned selling garments and descended to the level of selling coconuts in a corner of his shop. His two younger brothers blamed him for all this and started demanding their share of the property. Unwilling to lose the little left with him, Kamalakar refused to budge. With the connivance of the police and fake witnesses the brothers used the excuse of one such dispute to lodge a complaint stating Kamalakar had beaten them up. The police locked up Kamalakar a whole night. Dayananda and his mother Kamakshi, who never expected this to go to such extremes, were utterly shaken up, and with great anxiety managed to endure the night. The next morning they rushed to advocate Nayak's house who took them to the police station and secured Kamalakar's release after getting Dayananda to bail him out.

Dayananda was now caught in the strife between the brothers. The elders of the town advised Kamalakar's younger brothers. "Let the court decide what is right and wrong", replied the brothers brushing aside the advice. Dayananda was deeply enraged by the cruelty of the brothers. "Haven't you complained that we beat you up? ... Let that actually happen! ..." shouted Dayananda and rushed towards his uncle menacingly with a log of firewood. Sensing the situation getting out of his hands, weary of dealing with the police, exhausting all alternatives, a worn-out Kamalakar agreed to divide the property—which was split into three portions. The postal address that was once "Kamalakar Kulkarni's residence" now became "Kulkarni's compound." Since Kamalakar kept the house for himself he had to give away the vast open space around it to his brothers. They built smaller houses in this area. Kamalakar never bothered to find out where they had money to build when he was totally broke. Kamalakar continued with his coconut business and a kind of detachment gradually enveloped him. Because of all this, Dayananda, his only son, got to bear the burden of the family.

2

Despite failing his B.A., Dayananda didn't turn out to be a wastrel. Realizing much before his father did, that merely selling coconuts

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would not take them anywhere, he began selling Nira alongside to augment the income. Much before daybreak Dayananda would set out on a cycle to fill a pot with Nira, from where it was being tapped, tie it to the cycle-carrier and then move on to the highway to sell it. Since selling Nira wasn't a respectable profession, it was an advantage that he could finish before seven in the morning. Dayananda would display a board that announced "Nira available here" and sit underneath a tree waiting for his customers. All it needed was just five or six cars going by to sell the entire supply. At times Dayananda even made quite an extra bit by varying his prices going by the looks of his customers.

One early morning when Dayananda was returning home after selling Nira a car coming from Karwar met with an accident. A person carrying tender coconuts on a cycle fell down, and was hit by the car that had just negotiated a turn right behind him. The man was injured even though the car did not run over him. Dayananda immediately rushed to his help. The occupants of the car—an elderly couple with their son and their daughter-in-law belonged to Kolhapur and were travelling to Mangalore from Goa. With Dayananda's help they collected the scattered coconuts, set aside the cycle and rushed to the Government hospital to admit the injured person. Since it was an accident-case the hospital authorities lodged a complaint with the police who immediately filed a case. By the time Dayananda came back for his cycle to the place where he sold Nira, and returned home, it was already noon.

The same evening Dayananda happened to go to the hospital on some work. Out of curiosity he looked up the tender coconut seller who turned out to be alright except for a few minor wounds because of which he had lost some blood. The doctor, to create anxiety and fear wanted the injured person to stay in hospital under observation. Dayananda was filled with pity when he noticed the elderly couple and their daughter-in-law who had endured the harassment of the police throughout the day and had absolutely nothing to eat. The police had taken the son away to the police station as it was he who was driving the car. These people could not speak any language properly other than Marathi. They begged for the release of their son promising that, on going back to Kolhapur they would not only send money to the injured person but also have him shifted to a better hospital if it was necessary. Dayananda, filled with sympathy for them, rushed to advocate Nayak's house and went to the police station along with him. With the advice of the advocate, Dayananda provided bail to the young man and secured his release. Advocate

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Nayak provided perfect answers in legal jargon to the questions raised by the police. This infuriated the police who were planning to extort a huge amount of money out of this case. While releasing the man the PSI told Dayananda, "I hope you know what providing bail means ... let this fellow abscond ... I shall boot you into jail." Dayananda felt he had hoisted the burden of the accident upon himself in a moment of stupid courage. The elderly couple wept with gratitude on seeing their son.

Going by their word, they returned in two days with three others and an advocate. The tender coconut seller was getting better. These people paid him a handsome sum. They might even have bribed the police. On the whole, the case ended on a pleasant note, and before leaving, these people came to Dayananda's shop and gave him an envelope. Figuring that the envelope contained money, Dayananda refused to accept. They persuaded him to take it saying "Like providence, you intervened and saved our honour." On reaching home Dayananda opened the envelope and found a thousand rupees in it, which he kept for himself without uttering a word to anybody. Though he felt a little piqued for having his spontaneous gesture measured in terms of money, the utter monetary distress and the struggle to discover ways of making money made him come to terms with this donation. Such an unexpected gift helped him add more commodities to the coconut shop. But these little additions did not really enhance Dayananda's income by much, and so he continued selling Nira.

A few days after this incident, an old classmate of Dayananda's, Umesh by name, became a policeman. When Dayananda came to know about it, an old thought came back to his mind. The Nira business did not fetch Dayananda anything substantial. After a lot of thinking Dayananda went to Umesh and disclosed his thoughts. Umesh, who was an inexperienced policeman, took very nearly six months to come up with a 'customer'. A person who was a bank employee at Kumta was one of those caught during a raid on a brothel. Dayananda went with Umesh to the police station and provided bail to the person for a fee of two hundred rupees. Of this, fifty rupees went to Umesh and another fifty to the PSI.

Thus began Dayananda's racket of providing bail to people.

3

Initially Dayananda was deeply scared of providing bail to strangers. But those he knew were not in need of bail. Karwar was the

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biggest place around and its high crime rate matched its size. Dayananda never provided bail to anybody unless he was absolutely sure of his safety. At the beginning Dayananda felt that he himself was committing the crime, and the warning of the PSI when he was offering bail to those people from Kolhapur—"If he absconds, I will boot you into jail" was deeply impressed in his mind. But he convinced himself that he was not violating any law. In the friendship of the police, who were so necessary in this racket, Dayananda came face to face with several kinds of crimes. He provided bail to people of different sorts, like those who had slit the throats of brothers, husbands who had pushed wives into wells, those who had made their maid servants pregnant, those who had been caught during raids in brothels, people who broke into houses to burgle ... Several kinds of crimes and criminals did Dayananda come across because of this enterprise. He found that those who had erred for the first time were ignorant of the implications and the technicalities of courts, bail and other related matters. Though Dayananda could have exploited them to the maximum it was an element of recognition that he himself could have committed these errors, that eventually prevented him from exploiting their helplessness. As the days went by, Dayananda became quite proficient at this game and even lost the patience to dig into all the details of those who had violated the law, and for whom he was providing bail.

When Dayananda realised that a mere friendship with the police would not do, he started cultivating Advocate Nayak and spent a great deal of time either at the police station or in the court. He stayed at the shop only for a while in the evenings because it was unavoidable. The desire not to get trapped in any case led him to understand the intricacies of the law. Consequently, he and Advocate Nayak became rather close. When this racket of providing bail became more lucrative a share was marked out for the advocate. The constant relationship with the advocate and the police made him an expert as far as legal issues were concerned. Dayananda followed the case he took up till its very end. This became a habit, a curiosity, a sport. He could predict the judgement just going by the details of the offence. But not once did Dayananda ever transgress Advocate Nayak's advice not to provide bail to smugglers. Dayananda was totally preoccupied in evaluating everything in terms of the law. He was constantly exploring the hidden lanes, the unknown paths that one would have to sneak into while dealing with certain cases. This obsession with law took away anxieties related to details of the offence. He even started defining the terms of punishment for offences and cruelties of those

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who came to him. He went to the extent of wondering how a certain crime could have been committed without one getting caught legally. On occasions, while providing bail, he would exclaim "Why didn't you consult me? If you had acted like this no law on earth could have trapped you." Dayananda kept himself abreast of all the changes in law, for the question of right and wrong had to be redefined in relation to those charges. Advocate Nayak was always remarking "Its just that you haven't passed the law examination. But for this, you are no less than any lawyer."

Providing bail to just five or six a month fetched Dayananda quite a good sum. He was aware that people of the town had named him "Bail Saheba." He also felt sad that he couldn't counter it in any manner. The manner in which he got this name makes a curious story. When Dayananda began providing bail initially, there was a PSI called Rane. One evening Rane was sipping tea and eating Bondas, with his legs stretched out, while harassing a constable new to the job, as if he was in a world of his own. Dayananda entered the police station at that very moment. Sensing that somebody had come to the station, Rane asked the constable who it was that had come. The constable who had seen Dayananda the previous day didn't remember the name and started stuttering. The PSI who was in an elated mood joked. "Why on earth are you stuttering like that? Is it the Saheba? Ask him to come in." On listening to this Dayananda went in. Seeing Dayananda, Rane exclaimed, "Oh ho .. the Saheba of bail ... must come in ... must come in ..." Rane seemed to revel at his own joke. Dayananda smiled to please him. Rane kept uttering, "Bail Saheba," too pleased with himself for having discovered such a name. He always addressed Dayananda by that name thereafter. It didn't take long for this name to spread throughout the town.

None in Dayananda's family ever discussed this aspect. Even, Sunanda, his wife was aware of this much before the marriage. Even though she didn't like this she hadn't had the courage to raise the issue with her husband. Dayananda acquired a strange aura because of his friendship with the police and relationship with lawyers. Besides, money had started to accumulate gradually. His father occasionally muttered something about family honour and respectability, but others turned a deaf ear. Even the initially troublesome uncles had been softened by Dayananda's achievements. Whenever Dayananda was troubled by the fact that the members of the family were too embarrassed to face society in general, he tried to draw comfort from the fact that he was mighty and powerful, because of his knowledge of law and close relationship with the police. It seemed as if

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his sense of power was trying to find concrete manifestations, whenever possible going beyond his own limits. Dayananda looked keen to exhibit his powers to the world.

4

Once Dayananda had been to Sagar to attend the wedding of a relative's daughter. It was then that the police arrested Meenakshi's husband on her complaint. Meenakshi's mother was a distant relative of Dayananda's mother. More importantly they had been neighbours before. Meenakshi was the youngest of the four daughters. Her father Vasudev was employed in a grocery shop. It was quite an achievement that Meenakshi's father had let her complete the Matric exam after the harrowing experience of getting his first three daughters married. Meenakshi was to become Sheena's wife later on. Sheena's family was essentially involved in firewood trade. Sheena was more than fully living upto the notorious practices the family was known for. Sheena was a lech and had no sense of honour. Even curses sounded sweet to him. Meenakshi felt it better to die than to become such a man's wife. But she was intensely conscious of being a burden on her family and clearly saw that her father had become utterly helpless. Vasudeva seemed to bewail his helplessness whenever he set out with Meenakshi's horoscope in his bag. Hence she was in no position to reject Sheena when the proposal came from his family. "People will say a hundred things ... you should be brave and ignore what the people of the town may be saying .... leave everything to God who alone knows the truth ..." her family tried comforting her with tearful eyes. The town in turn which was always curious about who would wed a man like Sheena now talked about his good fortune and Meenakshi's bad luck.

The way Sheena tortured his wife was unimaginable. For a few days, he stuck to his wife faithfully. After which whatever she did was hopelessly wrong in his eyes. By then she had already had two children. One day, finding the curry too spicy, he chased her all over the backyard trying to pour it on her head. He beat her so badly it left stinging bruises on her body. He would come home very late in the night, or not turn up at all. The abuses he hurled at her were most foul. One day Meenakshi, locked herself in a room out of fear when Sheena rushed in announcing that he would kill her. He threatened to strangle the children to death if she did not come out. When she came out fearing he was capable of any vile act when drunk, Sheena battered her with a log of firewood. A bleeding Meenakshi went with her children straight to the police station and

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lodged a complaint against her husband. Seeing her in that state in the night with her children, the PSI was filled with pity. He asked constable Rama Nayak about Sheena's antecedents. When Rama Nayak started describing Sheena's infamous past, the PSI immediately registered a complaint and rushed to Sheena's house to drag a snoring Sheena to the police station. The hammering that Sheena received at the police station brought down all his inebriation. Sheena found himself in the lock-up. A distraught Meenakshi rushed to her father's house, and announced that she would jump into a well along with her children if she did not find any refuge there. Realising the implications, Vasudeva let his daughter stay at home.

The news of Sheena's arrest spread through the town the very next day, but none came forward to have him released. Even the Bail Saheba was not in town. Sheena somehow managed without food till the afternoon but then became hungry and asked the PSI for something to eat. When the PSI, started to rain curses and blows on him, Sheena felt the experience of hell. Sheena waited for the PSI to go out and then called a constable and asked him to contact the Bail Saheba at any cost. Sheena offered hundreds of rupees to the constable who greedily went out looking for Dayananda. The constable met Dayananda on the way who had just returned from Sagar and was on his way home. The constable reported everything that had happened and told Dayananda that the PSI seemed to have taken interest in the case and had even got a doctors certificate regarding Meenakshi's condition. While describing Sheena's brutality the constable out of unexpected sympathy for Meenakshi exaggerated quite a bit. Dayananda thought to himself that this case had become complicated, but still considered the many possibilities of unwinding the PSI's sympathy. Dayananda went to the police station and had Sheena released, using each bit of his intelligence and strategies in the process. A deal had been struck with Sheena for three thousand rupees.

Dayananda reached home puffed up with joy at this unexpected windfall, and the first thing that accosted him there was his mother's account of Meenakshi's situation. "Don't you dare get that evil spirit released" she added. Clapping his hands in great triumph Dayananda replied "I have already had him released. Who in this place had the guts to get him released except this Dayananda." Hearing this, his mother in uncontrollable fury and anger so far unknown to her pounced on him, "Was this the very first thing you had to do? Did you have to get that savage beast, that curse on the family, released? The people of the town had character not to be lured by money ... That is the reason why they did not get Sheena released. Did you

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have to display your power first, to do this, which is no better than licking shit for money? You should have let the court decide everything. And, did it never occur to you to think of poor Meenakshi ..."

"Don't rant mother ... I haven't committed any crime ... I have done everything according to law" Dayananda replied raising his voice. His mother's anger rose as she heard this, and she hit back, "Shame on you wretched fellow ... after all this you still believe you have done the right thing!! ... If its perfectly legal you wouldn't hesitate to murder a person. It's more honourable to beg on the streets than to indulge in such foul deeds." Dayananda was stunned by his mother's rage which he had never ever seen before. He went out fearing further onslaughts by her if he continued to stay at home. His wife didn't utter a single word. As he was leaving his mother shouted at him, "Where are you going? ... To lick the arse of the policeman? ... Sheena would have gone by now to slaughter Meenakshi ..." As he descended the steps Dayananda felt everybody at home was pushing him out.

5

Actually Dayananda hadn't given a single thought to Meenakshi. His entire being had concentrated on discovering ways of regarding Sheena as guiltless. In such subtle exercises one had to skip issues and questions that could emerge as obstacles of conscience. One had to operate more skilfully. It was like wriggling dexterously through a maze as any pause could easily get him stuck. In the climb to success, the games one had to play to ascend higher involved leaving several things behind and thinking about them, only tired one out. If Dayananda were to provide bail to Meenakshi, instead of Sheena, there was really no reason to believe that the memories of childhood, the lovely things that he had shared with her as a child would have touched his heart.

When they had been neighbours Dayananda and Meenakshi studied in the same school till the seventh standard, after which she went to a girl's school. The journey to and from school was done together. Dayananda used to be always late in getting ready for school. Meenakshi would always be on time, constantly setting her neatly plaited and oiled hair that was tied with a ribbon, and would wait for him on the platform outside the house. Only then would Dayananda frantically set his books in order. Meenakshi kept a piece of wet sponge in a tin box, with which she wiped her slate clean. Dayananda was fascinated by the sponge, but his ego prevented him from asking

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for it. Though she would let him use the sponge, she would take it back. The impulse to steal the sponge was very strong in him, but the fact he couldn't use it in school later on prevented him from doing so. Dayananda's mother would send any extra food to Meenakshi's house with him. On such occasions he was tempted to ask for the sponge, but held his desire back.

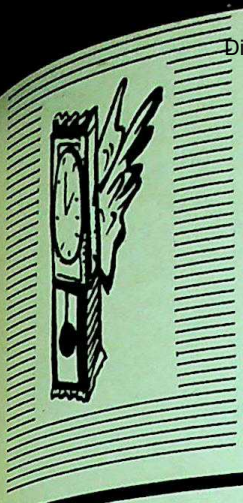
In the evenings, the women folk would gather on the Aralikatte to socialize. The children would play games such as building houses on cracked and broken parts of the platform. Dayananda and Meenakshi played together everyday in the same place. But as he grew up, Dayananda switched over to playing marbles. Initially the older boys who were more dexterous at the marble games were reluctant to have Dayananda play with them. Dayananda watched with fascination at the skill of the other fellows, who held a marble against the arched middle finger and then let go. He watched with amazement as the marble landed and displaced another on the ground, which went flying. Dayananda threw himself into this game with single-minded concentration and became an expert at it very soon. The love for marbles ended and Dayananda moved on to play Gilli-dandu which became his new addition. Then he moved further on to Lagori and Kabaddi. As the games changed, only a few friends of the past would remain with him. Each new game brought new friends and the old ones slowly started receding into the backgrounds. The moment he started playing marbles he stopped going to the Aralikatte. But Meenakshi continued to play there. Once Meenakshi invited him to play with her as she did not find anybody else to play with. Dayananda refused. She felt disappointed. Noticing her disappointment and the forlorn manner in which she went away Dayananda agreed to play with her. She did not wish to after his initial refusal. But somehow, Dayananda managed to bring her around. Both played silently. But the game of collecting twigs to build a house bored Dayananda in no time. Like a tiger that had tasted blood Dayananda kept thinking only of the target in the game of marbles and started fidgeting. □

Translated by N. Manu Chakravarthy and Sharath Ananthamurthy

1. Nira : A sweetish extract of Palm which turns into liquor after sunrise
2. Aralikatte : Platform surrounding the sacred Banyan tree
3. Gilli-dandu : A popular game played with sticks
4. Lagori : Another popular game played with tiles and a ball

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Ramesh Chandra Shah

STRIKE OFF MY NAME

My mind has run down to a stop
I often forget to wind it
Strike my name off the rolls.

I no longer know
Which class to attend
All classes appear alike to me
I am always present
Yet my attendance shows a sharp decline.

I no longer see
Even on the blackboard
I see no more
Than a hazy black spot
Or a hazy white

I hear nothing
Except unending noise

Though I am in the class-room
I seem to be standing outside
Though I have not been turned out
I can enter
Any classroom I like
No one obstructs me
Who benefits by letting me in
I do not know

My misdemeanours
Rebound on me
With added prestige
All my repeated mischief
Fails to bring back my memory

On whom shall I avenge
My defeat?

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My teachers? My classmates?

Strike off my name
At least I shall be unique
In my humiliation

There is no likelihood that I shall mend my ways
No more secrets to be exposed

There is no hope for me
In the many books you keep
You may credit my work
To any name you please

There yet remains my future
Smash that brimming jar
Before the congregation
At tomorrow's prayer-meeting

Strike off my name
They say my father too
Was once a student here ...

Well, let his name remain.
Strike my name
Off the rolls.

Translated from Hindi by S.H. Vatsyayan

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Shamsher Bahadur Singh

COME BACK O STREAM

Come back O Stream
Don't break up on evening
Stony soul

{I am an endlong moan of time
Mute endlong moan}

Come back, O petal of rose
Again
Cohere into the rose

Someone kisses oh
The flower of soilure.

SOLITARY IS THE PATH, PENSIVE FOUNTAIN

Solitary is the path, pensive fountain
Sky is settled
On the misty cloud-line

Where that young black woman
Had laughed.

EVEN THEN WHY

Even then why do you gather your nimbus round me?
I turned into a glance myself
In which you have preened your collyrium essence.

You are a small linn, encircled expansion, surfs so soft,
Staying on whose bosom-crest
Evening is looking into her interior, something of its own,
That darkness ...

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Some little personal room of breathings,
Pleasure of intimate heart-beats known,
—Incoming mistakes of life!

It is an uneasy quiescence ... this
Astray's camp of fancy-led gypsies:

It is a secret synchronization of two watches
pulsating amiss,
You could not have adjusted it before.

The depth of pond
Has come after touching the dusk of the sky zone.

Her dry-n-dense tresses
Laping today my soul-n-lashes,—

She won't let the morning tide breathe in life!
She even concealed the star's phantom in her bosque.

She became horizon unknown of my own.

LOVE

I have no possessions
Even then I love
I have no attractions
Even then I love
I have neither earthy etiquette nor intelligence
Even then I love
I have neither strength nor young's arrogance
Even then I love
I have neither an aesthete nor a connoisseur
Even then I love
Frail, Forlorn, simply sentimental I am
Even then I love.

I have tried how many strives
But I couldn't give up love
By all accounts helpless was life
But I couldn't give up love
I have pushed all: prayer, penance, silence,
But I couldn't give up love
I have so much roamed the Native and alien lands
But I couldn't give up love

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I have assumed different garbs
But I couldn't give up love.

Her every utterance is tricky
Even then she is a raving beauty
Illusion is her only keep
Even then she is a raving beauty
She is my bereaved cloud
Even then she is a raving beauty
Ruffled is my fancy life
Even then she is a raving beauty
Only mellowy is she like a roving sky
Even then she is a raving beauty
She is like an extreme scare, like a wonder
Even then she is a raving beauty.

A PALE EVENING

A Pale evening
Just a little suspended is the autumn leaf
Quiescent
Your lotus-face in my sentiments
Frail, lustre-less and lost
(or is it me
someone in your mirror of silence?)

Passion submersed
In slack moment
In collyrium of love
With tenderness of stunning beauty

About to drop is the suspended tear just about to drop
Like an evening star
In the immensity. □

Translated from Hindi by Raman P. Sinha

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Kailash Vajpeyi

PRAYER HALL

They were assembled
in a big hall
with their personal complaints.

An old man sitting on the floor
had lost his youth.
A newly married woman
was complaining about
her absconding husband.

A political leader
had lost his seat
An industrialist
who had gone bankrupt
was crying
like a baby and
a mother who had lost her baby
looked stunned.

Among all these complainants
the one
who had no grievance
was the one
got lost for ever

DEFINITION

In your language
What is the word for 'food'?
I asked the refugee boy.
He said ... Fire.
We call food 'fire.'

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And what is your word for fire?
He said—'Fuel.'

And fuel?
What is it that you call fuel?
I asked again.

The earth, the water.
The air, the sky ...

But this includes the whole cosmos!
Yes, he answered.

Is God too part of this list?
I finally asked.

No, replied the refugee boy.
He is what is born
After food has been consumed. □

Translated from Hindi by the Poet.



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Saratchand Thiyam

AWAITING RETURN

That mute
Stone statue waited everyday
For my return.

Whenever I return
I am guarded protected all around
By night's darkness.

Accosting that stone statue
I stood near it. I told it I have returned.
I tried to close those eyelids
Which had forgotten to close
Always gazing at me.
They refused.

The night's darkness gave hints.

I've left that stone statue alone
So that it'll await
My return from another trip.

CALCUTTA MY CALCUTTA

Huge mills factories belching
Black smokes
Have covered the vast sky's ceiling.

Boys who should be running jumping
Clutching balls
Arrive before the crack of dawn
To spread their hands near train-windows.

Toddlers who can hardly walk

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Are taught how to dance
To feign tenderness softness weakness
In hovels near the platform
By their mothers.

Calcutta in your park
Old men women walk hand in hand
Without a day's rest flowers try to bloom
Along with the odour of incense and joss sticks
Competing daring each other.

Calcutta
As one goes further away from you
Wasteland
Small huts in this wasteland
Men without clothes
Places turned into latrines.

Calcutta arrested at growth you
Never cease carrying.
From those aborted foetuses
The ones who survive stare
At the countries of the world
From windows of an orphanage.

Calcutta
Crowds rush in beside you
Crossing your hanging bridge
To listen to your sonorous Rabindra Sangeet.

Calcutta my Calcutta
Only this is my Calcutta
For the arrivals and the departures
As always.

DECEMBER

Lighting blazing bonfires
Dense jungles groves
Applied vermilion on December's forehead.
Winter unsheathing
The cold icy sword concealed among its sheets
Tried to rescue December. Could not.
December was humbled.

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Winter too defeated.
With head bowed when December arrived
On the village's narrow path
None was there to receive it.
When old men and women
In every home
Sitting around the hearth
Told supper-awaiting stories
To their grandchildren
December tried to intrude. Could not.
With legs crossed it emerged reeling
From the village road
To the city's street
Seen in the distance.
Timid on the city's street
As a drunkard seeing a policeman
Folds his body in
December was at a loss
Where to place his foot.
Madmen wearing sacks
Seeing December's condition, teased it.
Tapping aluminium platters with holes in them
They kept up a steady rhythm.
When angry December tried
To strangle the madmen
Winter pulled December away
Asking why it should confront madmen.
Frustrated December laid
Upon winter's lap.
With its thin cloak
Winter tenderly wiped away
The beads of sweat forming
On December's forehead.
So that it won't leave
Winter tended December.
When winter tired looking after it
Closes its eyes
December gets ready to go.
When that moment comes
December withdraws silently.

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AFRICA

Dry cracks.
The wide cracks on parched earth
Where many feet sank
Where many feet were broken.

Children running toward us
With kites flying
Fell into the cracks.
Vultures crows scattered
When they heard their crying voices.

Little grown-up girls
Keep on tearing the clothes they wear
And eat them up with relish.

At the aeroplanes overhead
They look up with yearning
Those who can't move but only their necks
Clutching their stomachs
Rows upon rows of enduring men
Wait for the dropping
Of either bombs or food packages.

Plucking their own ears and
Continuously chewing them
Savouring it
Young men
Stand in clusters
Around the cracks.

Many squeamish tongues
In countless numbers
Are torn and flung
Upon Africa's vast surface.
The cracks will be filled up
With corpses.

FOR THE DEAD

After creating bad blood bètween themselves
Mustering support, taking sides
They choose their ranks, provoking each other

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They wage war
Hate each other to the utmost.

After killing one another
They learn to love finally.
They tend the wounded
Feed tasty dishes to prisoners of war.

Many cities many countries
Painstakingly built
Are reduced to cinders in a minute.
Then for the dead, gardens are created
Every season flowers are showered on them.

Translated from Manipuri by Robin S. Ngangom



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Robin S. Ngangom

TO PACHA*

To your uneventful death, Pacha,
the stones hurled at your demented name,
and the doors closed on your life
it is fitting that none mourn
the face of your memory they slapped:
from piss artist Pacha, to loony Pacha.

There are no more tears to shed
in this withered country, where they kill
women and children, its nipples
have long gone dry, and taunting death
stalks your homeland. And why should
anyone weep for your solitary alcoholic end?
Young boys and soldiers are butchering each
other by the dozen, in the hills, the angry
streets, day after day, and too many heroes
and villains are not worth remembering at all.
Death is callous, Pacha, in the land of your
dewy-eyed birth.

Consummate madman, unknown comrade,
you were the best of them all
whether you mapped the geography
of your stricken town, pen dipped
in your fuddled blood, or portrayed
old men hard of hearing. Breaking heart
of roots, savage lover no woman would tame,
existential hero and fiercely proud pauper.

* Pacha Meetei (1943-1990), one of the finest Manipuri writers and Sahitya Akademi award winner, died at the age of forty-six. Hounded as a drunkard and a madman during his final days, he died in extreme poverty.

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How you must have laughed yourself insane
in the teeth of the gathering storm!

Hovel-dweller amidst concrete and iron,
anachronistic mendicant, and embracer of
manuscripts in pounding rain, angry star
which burned out in our skies, what were your dreams?
Reveal them for me, anonymous brother. Poetry
in your homeland must die a natural death,
when one must "sew up his lips and clog his ears
with mud", and to be a man, first of all, you must
sell yourself to the highest bidder.

Immaculate madling with glittering dreams
you refused to sell them in your land
where villains strut as the pure in streets.
You only said: "One's homeland is dear. I
have not seen all of this land, I have not
been able to tread the grass that grows there."

For a long time the tramps and loonies
beckoned you, and only they shall
honour your name.

TO A WOMAN FROM SOUTHEASTERN HILLS

Woman with the soft voice,
whispering wind among trees.
I know why you run away from me,
hiding from leaf to leaf, pursued
by my tarnished name, fading
from hill to hill. I being
born at an unearthly hour when
no creature stirred abroad, a
sibling of light and darkness,
and a freak among practical men,
this composer of bitter verse.
But you only toss you riverine hair,
and earth swims again on its wistful axis,
a river flows unknown in the underground heart.

You, woman, from southeastern hills,
cloud-covered mystery, gliding on rain,
deep drink of rice wine with eyes closed.

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child of the dancing bamboo, unction
of ginger on the wagging tongue. Your
voice is soft because mountainstreams
taught your heart.

Tonight, a full moon steals above northern pines,
and boys from your native land sit on terraces
with their dolorous guitars, singing of loves
lost in the ravines of the heart. I am that
plaintive lyric you've forgotten, the lovesong
you've exiled.

Even now my dreams sprout wings
among our impassive people, circling in
the air with sad pride and faraway months,
ever ready to die and be trampled in mud.
In you, woman, from southeastern hills
all our memories gather into trembling hopes,
taking us back to a time before they gave us
religion to divide us, before the actor priests
who laboured for their own redemption, mouthing
the name of god among benighted heathens;
a time before science, civilized laws and
rock music, a time in the memory of gods.
Before coat and before nylon, bare-bosomed time,
time of the *puan* and story-telling cloak,
the streaking motif caught on fabric, the
eloquent bead encircling your slender neck.
You, woman, on your father's terrace, a loom
hugging your hips, singing with the dancing
shuttle in your hand, you offered me tobacco.
In afternoons you return with water humming
in the bamboo and asked if I were thirsty.
That was the time of the weretiger, before
temples and churches, time of the freethinking
dormitory, when boys trained in the school of
the warrior, time of the daring headhunter,
when legends could not wait to be born, and
places were named. And time before this
English tongue we speak now.

Forgetfulness of being afflict us.
Let us refuse these names, woman,

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our names we proudly put down on pages
and documents, these names that come
between our lips, cold as parchment.
They can never learn our songs, or
feel the drum beats of our hearts
that can move unbidden feet.
How would they harness the rivers
in our blood, rushing without boundaries,
or tame our ravines and sullen fields?

Will you, woman, devastate these dreams
as men ravage the hills, leaving only
scars and litter, after all hopes
have been mind? Woman, from the land
of *Chhura,* our roots suck from the same
liquid tongue. Because of these
shared dreams and waters, none knows
you like I do, I who can love the
twin syllables of your name in silence.
Speak again, woman, with your dulcet tongue
for this is the desire of these hills
and weeping stones.

Puan : is the Mizo loincloth.
Chhura : is the name of a Mizo folk hero.

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Siddhartha Rai

HOLLOW DAY

In the wearisome mid-day
This fragile youth

is waiting for me
squatting on the ground.

I glance, from the bed
at the rat biting into shreds
the old gunny-bag.

In,the broad daylight I dream
the skylark is taking its flight
in the sky. Full of thirst,
Awake, I look out

through the window
at the cherry-tree

Crying on the terrace of the vale
Befriending itself with the gale.
And, I watch the July-mist too

sneaking into and going out
in utter tedium.

THE WINTER RAIN

It is raining down the roof
rolling into memories of the past
How eerie are the sounds, of the snow-flakes
and of the hail-storm.
I presume somebody is whispering nearby
But, that is no call for me

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Nor is anybody talking to me.

Life is a deception
It is but a sad illusion
They will not come back again,
No, not this way again.

Does anybody know, where it snowed tonight
in vain I waited, till nine O'clock in the night
alone by the fire-side.

Only in the morning I saw the old marigold
had dropped down dead
lashed down by the chilling cold.

Translated from Nepali by M.B. Rai



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NEIGHBOURS

Kishwar Naheed (Pakistan)

WE SINFUL WOMEN

It is we sinful women
who are not awed by the grandeur of those
who wear gowns

who don't sell our lives
who don't bow our heads
who don't fold our hands together.

It is we sinful women
while those who sell the harvest of our bodies
become exalted
become distinguished
become the just princes of the material world.

It is we sinful women
who come out raising the banner of truth
up against barricades of lies on the highways
who find stories of persecution piled on each threshold
who find the tongues which could speak have
been severed.

It is we sinful women.
Now, even if the night gives chase
these eyes shall not be put out.
For the wall which has been razed
don't insist now on raising it again.

It is we sinful women
who are not awed by the grandeur of those who
wear gowns

who don't sell our bodies
who don't bow our heads
who don't fold our hands together.

THE GRASS IS REALLY LIKE ME

The grass is also like me

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it has to unfurl underfoot to fulfil itself
but what does its wetness manifest:
a scorching sense of shame
or the heat of emotion?

The grass is also like me
As soon as it can raise its head
the lawn mower
obsessed with flattening it into velvet,
mows it down again.
How you strive and endeavour
to level woman down too!
But neither the earth's nor woman's
desire to manifest life dies.
Take my advice: the idea of making a footpath was a good one.

Those who cannot bear the scorching defeat of their courage
are grafted on to the earth.
That's how they make way for the mighty
but they are merely straw not grass
—the grass is really like me.

A PALACE OF WAX

Before I ever married
my mother
used to have
nightmares.
Her fearful screams shook me
I would wake her, ask her
'What happened?'
Blank-eyed she would stare at me.
She couldn't remember her dreams.

One day a nightmare woke her
but she did not scream
She held me tight in silent fear
I asked her,
'What happened?'
She opened her eyes and thanked the heavens
'I dreamt that you were drowning,'
she said,
'And I jumped into the river to save you.'

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That night the lightning
killed our buffalo and my fiancé.

Then one night my mother slept
And I stayed up
Watching her open and shut her fist
She was trying to hold on to something
Failing, and willing herself to hold on again.

I woke her
But she refused to tell me her dream.

Since that day
I have not slept soundly.
I moved to the other courtyard.

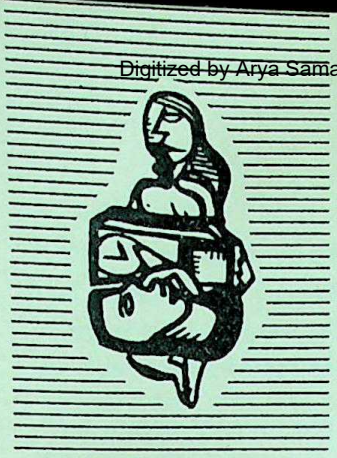
Now I and my mother both scream
through our nightmares.

And if someone asks us
We just tell them
We can't remember our dreams. □

Translated from Urdu by Rukhsana Ahmad

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INTERVIEW

LOOKING BACK

Gangadhar Gadgil in conversation with Ramdas Bhatkal

RGB : You have been writing for over half a century now—to be precise from 1941. This is a long span and especially so in this fast-moving twentieth century. Is it possible for you to have a perspective on your own writing during this period, particularly as a response to various happenings around you?

As a teenager in the 1930s and 1940s I was exposed to many social and political developments and upheavals in India and abroad. There was a very active social reform movement in Maharashtra. The liberation of women was a very live issue and my sympathies were entirely with the women. I saw all around me how they were humiliated, made to slave for the families and denied opportunities for self-expression. I used to be particularly hurt by the way my mother had to suffer for no fault of hers in the old social set up. Many of my stories are about women and they cover many facets of their lives in a changing environment.

Removal of untouchability was an issue that greatly exercised Maharashtra in those days and I was very much in favour of it. However, as I had not observed lives of scheduled caste people in depth, I did not write about their travails. But I wrote very appreciatively in my critical essays about S.M. Mate and Vyankatesh Madgulkar, two outstanding writers, who wrote with great insight, realism and sympathy about the lowest strata of society. Subsequently I welcomed Dalit literature, which expressed vividly their sufferings and anger and in doing so both enriched Marathi literature and made it more socially inclusive. I have at the same time expressed the hope that Dalit literature would not imprison itself in a certain ideological mould. It should, in my view, go beyond certain themes and expression of strident anger. I feel very sorry that a deepening chasm

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of hatred is dividing different castes and communities in India.

I belonged to the Maharashtrian white collared middle class in Bombay. They lived poor, miserable lives as clerks, teachers, salesmen etc. There were a few professionals among them like lawyers, doctors, etc. They had so few opportunities in life and they lived in such a small constricted world, that it stunted most of them, both intellectually and emotionally. I felt both sympathy and contempt for them and I wrote stories bringing out my varied experience of and responses to middle class life in Bombay. These middle classes lived in small *wadis* or neighbourhoods and life in those *wadis* was basically similar to the life in an Indian village. I have written with humour, nostalgia and affection about this life in *wadis*.

Bombay has changed over the years. It has become a megalopolis, huge, complex and overpowering. Life there has been depersonalized and the individual is dwarfed by the scale on which everything is organized. I have written a number of stories about this Bombay.

One cannot live in Bombay without being confronted by the beggar, the children who live in the streets, the goondas and the pickpockets. I have not written many stories about them. But I have written a few, which I think are moving and revealing.

There is so much in Bombay that is comic and even absurd that it demands to be told. I have written many humorous stories and narratives of loosely stringed episodes about this aspect of life in Bombay as well.

Riots and agitations have been all along an important part of life in Bombay. One of my widely appreciated stories is about the impact of a riot on life in Girgaum. Another is about the changing moods of Bombay and various episodes that take place on a day of violent agitation during the freedom movement.

I saw the break-up of the joint family and the old jagirs in Maharashtra. These old institutions had to go. They were outdated. But at the same time they had some endearing and even noble features. Some of my finest stories are about these institutions and their death throes. They have been written objectively and yet with a nostalgia.

Indian society and its history have always fascinated me. This was all the more so as I saw history being made before my very eyes. I saw the successful end of the freedom struggle and the traumatic events associated with the partition of the country. I saw our country being humiliated in the Indo-Chinese war and also the triumph of Indian forces in the Indo-Pakistan wars. I saw Nehru's doomed effort to build a prosperous and socialist India and I also experienced the

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dark period of emergency. I very much wanted to write a novel on history in the making. What I saw and experienced was too close to be viewed in a historical perspective. So I decided to write a major historical novel on a fifty year span of contemporary Indian history dominated by the indomitable Lokmanya Tilak. The novel is not only about Tilak but about other great men like Vasudeo Balwant Phadke, Ranade, Dadabhai Naoroji, Vivekananda and many others who lived and made history in those vibrant fifty years. It took me nearly four years to write that novel. But those years of labour were also very happy and fulfilling years.

The Communist movement and Marxist theory had entranced Indian intellectuals when I was a boy and the general fascination continued until Stalin's orgies of death and the people's war thesis broke the spell. But there were a large number of committed intellectuals who stayed committed even afterwards. They are very much around even now.

I was disillusioned with Communism when as a teenager I read about Stalin's butcheries and subsequently when the peoples' war thesis was advocated after Russia was invaded by Hitler. However, as a young boy I liked socialist ideas. When I began to specialize in economics at college, I intellectually rejected Marxist economic theory, but for some time I was fascinated by the concept of a socialist market economy based on price mechanism in a socialist framework. I soon realized, however, that in practice such a socialist market economy was unworkable.

I was decisively disillusioned with socialism when I saw the effects of Nehruvian economic planning on our economy. As early as the beginning of sixties I realized that we were traversing the road to economic disaster and political serfdom. I made bold to say so in an article. In those heady days of enthusiasm for socialism my article received a very hostile reception. That did not deter me, as I was used to swimming against the current and facing hostility. Every time I had proved right and I knew that the same thing would happen in respect of my economic ideas.

I bided my time, however, and when the damage done by socialist economic policies became intolerable I wrote in the seventies a series of humorous articles exposing the absurdity and perversity of the economic policies that were being followed. I also wrote about the corruption they were spawning and the disastrous impact they were having on our economy. I used mythological stories like the story of *Bhasmasur* to bring home my point. I called these humorous articles *Arthik Navalkatha* i.e. wonderous economic tales. These articles were

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a great success particularly with the younger generation and they broke the spell of socialist ideology in Maharashtra. I look upon these *Arthik Navalkathas* as one of my significant contributions to Marathi literature and thought.

I have thus responded as a creative writer and intellectual to major social developments in the last fifty years. My responses however have not been loud and oversimplified as those of many so-called socially aware and progressive writers.

RGB : The Western, modern liberating influences, inclusive forces and social/political commitments played a major role in the development of your literary milieu. Were these necessarily complementary? Or sometimes contradictory? How were they reconciled in your generation of writers?

The Western literature of the twenties and thirties and intellectual ferment in the West were certainly liberating influences. Even Marxism in its initial impact played a liberating role by questioning accepted ideas about society. Marxists, however, became prisoners of their ideology and of the so-called progressive movement of the Communist party. There was in the thirties, forties and fifties a great intellectual conflict between liberating modern ideas and the constricting communist ideology. For me the conflict was a heady experience and I was all along an ardent advocate of liberal ideas as against the narrow and enslaving Communist ideology.

As regards most Marathi writers of earlier generation, they were not intellectually involved in this great debate. They had sympathies for the poor and were hostile to the rich. They had a benign Gandhian concern for the rural folk. They were ardent advocates of women's liberation and abolition of untouchability. They did not bother to establish any intellectual coherence in these ideas, which I think was less damaging than a firm ideological commitment.

While writers of my generation too did not by and large get involved in the great intellectual debate, they shed wooly sentimentality and idealized and oversimplified depiction of rural and urban life. They wrote with more realistic understanding and genuine sympathy about rural and urban life. There were also the first and welcome stirrings of awareness among writers, who were untouchables. That was the beginning of the expression of the anger, frustration and bitterness of the untouchables in Marathi literature. This turned into a literary flood in the next twenty years. Some so-called intellectuals want it to create a permanent intellectual divide. So at least it seems. But I think that in reality it is a great inclusive process, which brings millions of people into the common stream of cultural life.

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RGB : Can you elaborate on your favourite term used in your autobiography *Eka Mungeeche Mahabharat*—Festival of Freedom?

I have described the *navasahitya* or new literature movement spearheaded by *navakavita* and *navakatha* as a great celebration of freedom. We, who created this movement, broke free from various constricting literary conventions. We wrote about ordinary—unheroic characters and their ordinary lives. We stopped writing neat and tidy stories and depicted the untidy, wayward patterns perceived in life. We perceived vividly the irrationalities and inconsistencies in the make up of our characters and probed into the depths of the human psyche. We depicted in our writings the ugly, the obscene, the vulgar, the absurd, the bizarre etc. in life. We probed the many possibilities of humorous writing and there was black humour too in Mardhekar's poetry. We brought into the fold of literature words and expressions that were not considered literary. We developed more intense, resonant, suggestive and varied literary styles to suit the themes we wrote about. We questioned the prevailing concepts of literary criticism and introduced concepts and methods which greatly enriched critical writing in Marathi. We familiarized Marathi literary world with aesthetic theories and also pointed out their limitations. We explored in many directions the world of human experience and refused to be the prisoners of any ideology. We celebrated a great festival of freedom through our writings. That seems to me the most meaningful response that writers could make to the attainment of independence.

RGB : Having tried to know about the events and ideas that shaped your personality and ideas, let me now turn to your own writing. Considering your bilingual abilities, how did you choose to write basically in Marathi?

I am surprised that such a question should even be asked. The stories etc. I write are about Marathi people. They think and express themselves in the Marathi language. The cultural milieu in which they live, act and feel is Marathi. Moreover my mother tongue is Marathi. I perceive, feel and think in Marathi. It is therefore quite natural that I should write my literary works in Marathi. It never really occurred to me that I should write in any other language.

Having said this, I must also acknowledge that the English language, English literature and Western ideas and intellectual tradition have not only influenced me but also are very much a part of me. This bilingual make up has, I think, greatly enriched my personality. Mardhekar wrote the kind of poetry he wrote because he was influenced by J.M. Hopkins and Ramdas as well as Tukaram. Similarly,

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I have written the kind of stories I have written because I have been influenced by the Marathi story tradition as well as short stories and novels of great Russian, European, British and American writers. I think, feel and perceive not only in Marathi but also in English and I became a somewhat different person when I think and feel in English. I thus have two somewhat different personalities, who, look at things from different cultural perspectives. The 'other me' who thinks and feels in English also demands literary expression. Moreover, he opens up new possibilities of literary creation. It is this 'other me' who makes me write in English and also translate my Marathi stories into English.

RGB : How did you choose to write short stories which were (and sometimes still are) considered a minor literary form? The form was handled by literary giants like Khandekar and Phadke as a minor form as compared to their novels. It is only after the Gadgil, Gokhale, Madgulkar, Bhave era that short story attained the maturity and stature of a significant literary form in Marathi.

The decades in which I began to write and developed as a writer was par excellence the era of the literary magazines in Marathi. Thus the external literary environment was favourable to writing stories. But the era was favourable for writing novels also. In spite of it I chose to write stories because of many reasons. One is that I was trying to do something quite different. I wrote stories which were poems in prose, expressing a mood, an atmosphere. I also wrote stories which had no coherent plot. Some times they were like reveries. Sometimes they were juxtapositions of different unconnected events, sometimes they were explorations into a world of fantasies, while on other occasions, they were tantalizing amalgams of fantasy and the experiences of work-a-day world. Sometimes they were expressions of mere frivolity. Some of them explored the depths of the human psyche. Sometimes they were also vivid presentations of significant social developments or snapshots of a decaying social world. Writing of this kind required a great deal of freedom. Short story as a form gave me this freedom, which a novel could not have possibly given. A novel needs a reasonably strong structure to carry the weight of its mass. A story doesn't. So I preferred to write stories.

Since I had broken free of the prevailing literary conventions, I found myself in the midst of a treasure house of varied experiences that had not been expressed in literature. I was anxious to express them in words as a creative writer. I could do this by writing quickly a whole lot of short stories of different kinds. That is another reason

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why I wrote short stories.

You are quite right when you say that the short story is no longer a minor form in Marathi literature. This is because of the high literary quality and substantial content of the short stories written by the new short story writers. The importance of the short story in Marathi literature is often not realized by or brought home to writers and readers in other Indian languages.

RGB : You have tried your hands at all the different forms except poetry. You have developed different forms of humour, written two novels which are vastly different from each other. Your travalogues have a unique flavour and you have even tried to write for the theatre. Your 900 page autobiography has also been hailed for its insight, explorations of the creative process and analysis of literary issues. It is being admired for its restraint and poise. What were your motivations in exploring these different forms of literature?

The reason for this exploration of different forms of literature is that I am made that way. I like to try my hand at a lot of things. It is a natural impluse. As a writer I try to explore all kinds of experiences and express them through appropriate literary forms. Moreover as one tries one's hand at a new literary form one begins to perceive patterns, emotional shades and meanings which otherwise one would not have noticed. It is a two way process. Content points to form and the form in turn suggests new possibilities in respect of content.

RGB : What made you turn to humorous writing, while you were preoccupied with writing extremely serious stories?

In my emotional life here are sharp swings from extremes of depression to extremes of exhilaration. I am often in very high spirits bubbling with gaiety and laughter. In such a mood the ridiculous and the absurd in life beckon me. I see the absurdities in me and in others. Instead of worrying about a lot of things in life, I perceive the irrationality, the cant and the absurdity in them. These perceptions find expression in my humorous writings.

Humorous writing has given not only an outlet to my high spirits and sense of fun, but they have enriched my serious writing too. It has enabled me to distance myself from my most intense experiences. It has given me as a writer of serious fiction a poise a restraint that, I believe, has enriched my serious writing. It has also made me perceive the bitter and not so bitter ironies of life and added a different ironic dimension of meaning to my serious writing.

At the same time my serious writing has enriched my humorous

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creations. I have explored the many possibilities of humour. There is the bubbly, high spirited humour of Bandu and Snehalata stories, the quiet, tongue-in-cheek, nostalgic humour of my *Firkyas*, which are an amalgam of the short story and personal essays. There are humorous expeditions in the land of fantasy like my story 'The Truth of the Matter.' There are the one-act plays which are comedies verging on and often merging into farces. There are the *Arthik Navalkathas* which poke fun at the absurdities in our economic policies. There is the series of stories of the misadventures of a learned young Brahmin, totally lacking in practical wisdom. His Guru tells him to keep away from women, but women do enter his life and drive him into one misadventure after another. This series of stories bears relation to the tales of old times.

I have greatly enjoyed these explorations of the world of humour. They are also considered by many to be significant contributions to humorous writing in Marathi.

RGB : You were instrumental in sharpening the conflict between the old and the new in Marathi literature. You were one of the standard bearers of the *Navakatha* movement and stoutly defended the *Navakavita* of Mardhekar and P.S. Rege. But later on you seem to have shifted your stand and treated the conflict as a temporary phase. Can you explain this change in your position?

It is true that in the initial phases of the *Navasahitya* controversy I pointed out the salient features of *Navakatha* and *Navakavita* and explained how they represented a departure from established literary conventions as well as the literature they spawned. However, I never believed or contended that *Navasahitya* was a separate entity, entirely different from the traditional literature. There was no permanent adverse relationship between the two. In one of my articles explaining the characterstics of Navasahitya, I said that Navasahitya was not a separate circle completely unrelated to the circle of traditional literature. It was a bigger circle with a different central point which included the circle of old literature. This article was written at a very early stage in the Navasahitya controversy. Subsequently to bring this proposition home effectively, I wrote a series of critical articles on masterpieces in traditional literature. I used the approach, method and perceptions of 'new literary criticism' to write these articles and showed that the literary excellence of old classics is revealed in far greater measure by the new literary criticism or *Navateeka*.

If a new literary movement rejects all that is old, it impoverishes and isolates itself. Similary, tradition that shuns new things becomes

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moribund. I asserted this and further pointed out that tradition is created by those who break it.

RGB : In your writing career have you had any significant turning points where you felt like rejecting the past or you got tired of what you were doing?

This has been happening to some degree all the time. I am a person who gets quickly bored. I even get bored with my own speeches and therefore they are short. I hate doing the same thing over and over again. I wrote many short stories but they were never the same kind of stories. I wrote many different kinds of stories. I also tried my hand at many different literary forms. I wrote two books on travel but they are quite different from each other. The first book is a straight narrative. In the second book, I have tried to create short stories or highly poetic personal narratives out of my travel experiences. I wrote two novels but they are so different from each other that it would be difficult to recognise them as the works of the same writer, if they did not bear my name. My humorous writing is equally varied.

RGB : Did you plan a novel on Tilak because you reached a dead end in your short story writing?

Not quite. I wrote some of my best stories after finishing *Durdamya*. But I had been writing short pieces for so long that I felt like writing something big and monumental. Moreover, until then I had looked at and written about the characters I created from within and rarely from outside. My style was highly evocative and closer to poetry. I felt an urge to do something different. So I wrote *Durdamya* which is a work of monumental proportions. It is based on facts and adheres to them. It, therefore, requires a different kind of creativity. Thirdly, it is written from the outside and not from within the world of characters it embodies.

I tremendously enjoyed writing it and it fertilized my somewhat tired creativity. After finishing the book I wrote many works which were quite different in character.

RGB : Autobiography as a literary form raises many fundamental issues—formation of one's personality, moral foundations, motivations, criteria of success and failure. Have you tried to tackle these in your autobiography?

I chose to write an autobiography for various reasons. Many years had elapsed since I wrote *Durdamya* and I felt an urge to try my hand at a big work, which will occupy me for a few years. Secondly, I am basically a forward looking person. I rarely hark back to a world of memories or feel nostalgia about the past. I felt that I should for

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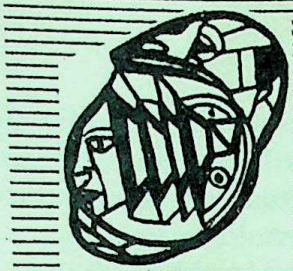
a change look back and take a look at the kind of life I had lived. Thirdly, I found that autobiography is a literary form which allows me to be a story teller, a poet, a critic, an intellectual, a humorist, an economist and a social comentator all at once. It could include everything and at the same time pose many challenges. I could be all these things but in doing so I had to create a work which had a loose kind of unity. Moreover, I had to write about myself without becoming a bore or a tiresome, humourless, egoist. I had to write about myself but do it from a correct and meaningful distance and with a poise born out of a mature understanding of life. My emphasis had to be on things as they happened and as I experienced them. At the same time I had to have one or more frameworks of values in terms of which they could be understood, interpreted and evaluated. I very much wanted to avoid making it an exercise in self-flagellation, or whining self-justification or angry denunciation of the world in general and of adversaries in particular. To complain that life has been unfair and unkind to me, seems to be meaningless. The world was not created to make me happy. I have to accept it as it is and do my best to live the kind of life I like to live.

An autobiography can be written in many different ways. I thought that the most important thing in my life was that I am a writer and I decided to write my autobiography with a focus on myself as a writer.

These are the decisions I took. I would not be presumptious enough to say that they were the most sensible or correct decisions. All I can say is that I took my decisions according to my lights. It seems that I have written an autobiography which is earning the appreciation of the lay readers and also of many fellow writers. Naturally that makes me happy and gives me a sense of fulfilment. □

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ENCOUNTERS WITH REALITY

Sisir Kumar Das

NO writer, howsoever insignificant will concede that the problems of his time are in any way less challenging than those faced by his ancestors. Every writer faces problems involving the medium of expression, the dynamics of literary production or the ideological forces operating in the society. But it is the specificity of the problems and uniqueness of the challenges emerging out of them that obliges him to re-examine the past and to evolve new strategies to negotiate with the present. The Indian writer today is placed in a particular historical situation, which is extremely crucial both from the point of view of the changing linguistic situation, modes of transmission and literary patronage, and the ideological problems involving the concepts of modernisation and progress, construction of the Indian nation and of course the multiple coordinates of identities that he has inherited.

Our time is not conspicuous by any spectacular social revolution or of any particular religious movement or even the presence of any powerful political ideology. On the contrary the writer stands in a world which witnesses the collapse of the socialist world, aggressive emergence of religious fundamentalism, political legitimization of violence, growing irrelevance of any kind of moral order and a slow trivialization of human suffering. Those who believe in a necessary correlation between the literary greatness and a stable and prosperous society, such as the relation between Aeschylus and Athens or Kalidasa and the Indian golden age, would hardly expect the Indian writer to produce anything comparable to great literary achievements of the past. Yet the writer, worth his salt, knows he cannot wait for a propitious moment as he cannot also wait for the divine inspiration to descend upon. Not only has he to work like any labourer of the society but he knows that every moment of history is good for him, and in fact the present is the best moment.

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The greatness, not only elusive and like all other phenomena, fragile, depends largely on the attitude of the succeeding generations. Being concerned primarily, if not entirely, with the present, neither does the writer wish to be dictated by the canons stipulated in the past nor by the apprehension of a judgement not yet delivered. The world in whatever form he inherits is challenging, because despite all greatness of art of the past centuries, none is adequate for the present, every movement demands its own art. Modern India demands a modern Indian literature.

The most important legacy of all Indian writers is undisputedly the discourse on modernity initiated by the introduction of a new education and an European language in Indian society, both as parts of colonial agenda. The Indo-European encounter generated forces changing literary sensibility and perception which eventually caused a partial break with earlier literary traditions, models and canons. This phase of literature, often described as 'modern' by literary historians, emerged in each of the Indian literature, in successive stages, at different points of time during the last two hundred years. The modernity identified by the critics and the writers themselves is not only a category of periodization, a mere chronological marker but also a concept related to the idea of progress, a new perception of time and an assertion of reason over faith. The impact of Western education and the limited use of technology, the printing press being the most important, changed the mode of transmission which separated literature from other arts, particularly music, and more significantly bifurcated the whole literary community into 'literature' and 'illiterate'. Equally important is the proliferation of new themes, new interest in the temporal world causing a shift from a god-centric universe to a man-centric one. Along with the themes emerged new genres. The newness of this literature was quickly related to the European impact and the Indian esponse to it. Our literary consciousness till the 19th century never had any particular claim to superiority of the present over the past. We did not have any *querelle des Ancient et des Modernes* in our literary history, though shift in experiences, or changes in modes of expression, had never gone unnoticed. There was a great shift in the medieval Indian literature, in the languages, and in the world view and in the literary structures, yet none of the medieval poets declared his superiority over the past poets nor the medieval critic constructed an epistemology of modernity. Since the midnineteenth century not only did the concept of modernity become crucial in our literature but the paradigms of modernity were bor-

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rowed from the West strongly suggesting the superiority of Western literary models and critical frameworks. We have inherited this legacy.

It is of course an oversimplification of a complex situation arising out of literary encounter in a colonial context. We know that the Indo-European encounter with all its ramifications created a crisis in our literary history. The literary encounter was only a part of a larger encounter between two peoples; no existing framework of influence and reception is adequate to deal with the vastness and complexities of the phenomenon fully. There was as much warmth in the Indian response to Western literature and values entailed in it, as stiff and stubborn was the resistance offered to it. The resistance was explicit in certain language areas though it was neutralized by the new elite. The resistance of the indigenous literary sub-conscious of the people, including the new elite, the creators of the new, 'modern' literature, however surfaced again and again. It is this resistance of subconscious that determined the nature of the new literature. To give an example, we borrowed the novel from the West, with a view to creating an alternative of and probably a superior form of our own narratives, but finally what emerged was a genre born out of the tension between the alien model and the indigenous tradition. On the one hand there is an overpowering presence of European models despite our glorification of ancient India as part of our political agendas. On the other hand there is also a hesitation, a tension and resistance. Both conditioned our relation with West and our response to Western modernity. Like the Orientalists' construction of India, we too constructed Western stereotypes: if West found India exotic, enigmatic, and hostile the Indians too found it exotic, enigmatic, hostile. The Orientalist discovered the still centre of life in ancient Indian ideals, and his focus was on the past. The Indian writer accepted West as a contrast, as a world of movement and speed, and his focus was on the present. This perception of basic differences between East and West surfaced from time to time vigorously in various forms in our literature, particularly in the autobiographies and the travelogues and only sporadically in fiction. Pramatha Chaudhuri's *Car iyari Katha* (1916, Tales of Four Friends)—a little known work even in Bengal though a fine piece of writing of dazzling wit presents a narrative of an imperfect encounter between the two civilizations under the veneer of frivolties. The first speaker of this story—the structure of the narrative is a sophisticated reconstruction of the Indo-Persian narratorial framework—introduces himself in the following manner: "My body was in India, my mind was in Europe. The light of Europe had

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penetrated that mind, and by that light I could see clearly that there was no life in this country. This passionate Europhilia, shared by his other friends, all products of Macaulayian dispensation and colonial rule eventually gets a severe jolt and the story of Indian overtures of love for West turns into a metaphor of frustration and embarrassment. The four Indians tell stories of their love and contact with four English women, one mad, one a thief, one a trickster and one a ghost. I give another example from an altogether different genre, the autobiography. Gandhi describes his initial response to England. Having learnt his first lesson in European etiquette to his utter discomfort, soon after his arrival in England, he felt, "Every thing was strange—the people, their ways, and even their dwellings." Gandhi sums up the experience of Indian encounter in one word, *strange*. This strangeness is a recurring theme of Indian travelogues in the nineteenth century and it continued to be so in the twentieth.

Our interest in Europe has not been exhausted with the end of the colonial rule. On the contrary it has been intensified, and the relation all along ambivalent has been further problematized. Our dependence on the English language, which retains its colonial aura, has further increased, our anxiety for Eurocentricism has not resulted as yet in the emergence of alternative paradigms of thought, but quite often manifested in insensitive impositions of Western categories on our literature and life. This challenge before the Indian writer that comes from the Western hegemony in canonization of texts and taste is, therefore, extremely serious. Our academic criticism is totally barren, our literature-teaching mindless, university departments of literature are pigeon-holes where time has come to a stop. The writers are also in a dangerous situation, not simply because of the hazards of prizes and awards, or growing commercialism, and control of a few business houses over the production of literature, but the false and elusive movements of modernities and of post-modernism. This is not to deny the historic role of each of the movements originating in the West. This is only to assert the movements emerged out of their own experience of history and their challenges against the existing order. We are yet to qualify ourself to be unhappy in the Western way. Let our unhappiness and suffering, and our experiences of history be the basis of our modernity.

II

Since the construction of modernity in literature is deeply involved with the changes in the language itself in terms of its develop-

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ment from within to accommodate new range of experiences and to cope with new complexities, an Indian author today is necessarily more anxious than ever with the changing linguistic scene in the country, particularly in relation with the hegemonic languages. It may be recalled that the introduction of the English language in the last century created a new social hierarchy and also a crisis of identity among some writers for a brief period. A few chose English as the sole medium of their literary expression, a few experimented with it for some time but finally decided to write in the mother-tongue, and the majority preferred a bilingualism, wrote only in the mother-tongue but English also acted as a subterranean language controlling and contributing to the growth of new registers, in the mother-tongue itself. The choices were motivated by the writers attitude to the ruling power in particular and the Western world in general, as well as by their understanding of the relation between language and people, and language and identity.

The allegations of inadequacy of Indian languages as media of complex and modern sensibility which prompted many Indians to write in English in preference to mother-tongue is too insidious and naive to be seriously reflected. Equally false is the assertion that none can be creative in an acquired language. A writer is indeed free, or atleast one should not object to his freedom, to choose his medium. The issue of linguistic choice today is quite different from that in the colonial period, it being a part of a larger problem of power relations between the major and minor languages. The opposition between English and Indian languages can be redefined today as that of *international* and *national*. The ruling elite of opposition: *national* and *regional* which has created new hegemonic situation within the country.

The major-minor opposition is not relevant exclusively to the colonial or the post-colonial third world but to some extent for smaller nations of Europe as well. The numerical strength of speakers or a large territory of operation or a distinguished history of literature and philosophy do not necessarily make a language a major language unless it is also affiliated with a major political and economic power. None of the Indian language, though many of them fulfil the first three criteria, is a major language. English is. It is a major language, in fact the major language today, not because it is the language of Shakespeare, but because it was once the language of East India Company, and now it is the language of President Clinton.

There was a time in our history when writers wrote without any particular awareness of the linguistic hegemony in the world. But

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the linguistic hierarchy that existed in the society has always posed a problem to the writer. At times he adopted bilingualism, Sanskrit and mother-tongue, at times he revolted against the dominant language. Kabir denounced Sanskrit as stagnant, he valorised the popular speech as the flowing stream. Today our relation with English problematizes the choice of language in an altogether different manner. The history of civilization has seen the rise and fall of many languages and changes in the linguistic hegemony with the fall of empires. The roles that Sanskrit, or Greek, Aramaic or Arabic played in certain periods of history may not recur. The domination of the Western languages, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, to name a few coincided with the expansion of their empires. Smaller nations and smaller linguistic communities were forced, or motivated to accept, a more powerful language, relatively a major language. They watched helplessly as their languages gradually became marginalized, suppressed and in certain cases, vanished altogether. The relation between the national-official and regional languages and the relation between the major and minor, or multinational and national naturally pose new problems for the Indian writer today. Can he totally ignore the presence of a multinational language which is a constant reminder of the regional-international opposition, not excluding the pejorative connotations of regionalism? Does he feel demoralized, and insecured which might result either in the growth of an obscure vernacularism, a blind nativism, an aggressive regionalism, or at a different level a self-pity resulting in an uncritical adulation of anything that receives Western testimonial? Or will he still try to use a language in which is embedded the myths and memories of his people, a language which can guide him into the inner recesses of a community? The world at large, and the Eurocentric Indian will of course continue to look at the Indian literatures as regional. They will remain unknown to the rest of the world unless and until *we* make them available to the West in a major language. This is our placement in the history of modern world. Can we change it? Or is this irrelevant? The writer writes for a literary community and so long that community exists the act of writing is relevant. Even when a writer writes in a major language he writes for a more or less identifiable community and not for everyone speaking and reading that language. Certain languages provide the potentiality of a wide market, a promise of a profitable commercial proposition but the writer must have an anchorage some where—it has to be a language, a people, a region. The writers in a major language too, are searching

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for roots in history in the people and in the region.

But it is not necessarily easy for the writer in a regional-minor language to discover the region fully and completely. The region gets extended and unfolds itself continuously. He writes with a double responsibility. As he continues to explore into the region he also produces a resisting test of the region as a challenge to the Western constructs of India, sustained not only by looking towards the Western market but by all of us, to some extent. This brings me finally to the question of the construction of India, a continuous exercise throughout centuries, which entered into a new phase in the colonial period. We tried to construct an India as something more permanent more tangible than the territorial concept of a country; a vision capable of withstanding the changes in political boundaries and accommodating the new and the fresh and the alien within its fold. This vision of India emerged out of many contradictions and oppositions—which still exist—and culminated in Rabindranath and Gandhi and Nehru. This vision has been celebrated throughout the colonial period in thousand songs and poems. The partition of the country was certainly the biggest challenge to that image of India of many cultures, many languages, many religions, many systems of thoughts, a vast landscape of contrasts and varities. "When I think of India", wrote Nehru, "I think of many things: of broad fields dotted with innumerable small villages; of towns and cities I have visited; of the magic of the rainy season which pours life into the dry parched up land and converts it suddenly into a glistening expanse of beauty and greenary, of great rivers and flowing water; of the Khyber Pass in all its bleak surroundings; of the southern tip of India; of people, individually and in the mass; and above all, of the Himalayas, snow-capped or some mountain valley in Kashmir in the spring, covered with new flowers, and with a brook bubbling and gurgling through it." India has changed again, geographically and politically, since this beautiful passage was written. But that vision of India constructed by the poets and saints, survives the vagaries of political change and invites the modern writer to strengthen it by carrying out the continuous process of the discovery of India.

The four texts, to give one example *Hind Swaraj, Gora, The Discovery of India* and *Maila Anchal*, written by four Indian writers of different standing, in four different languages record the trials and tribulations through which the Indian identity has been constructed The image of India that the educated Indians constructed as an answer to the Western nation state is a space that accommodated

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various identities, regional, linguistic and religious. *Desa* and *nadu*, *nationalism* and *internationalism*, *religion* and *humanism* were not considered structures of opposition but components that can harmoniously exist within one structure itself. Renu presents a protagonist, doctor an educated waif saved from the river Koshi and brought up by a woman abandoned by her husband, who also got lost one day in the crowd. And yet he found an identity, which is both regional and national. The metaphor of the waif finally finding his identity that appeared in *Gora* recurs in the novel with a new relevance, as does Gandhi's understanding of the village in the metaphor of *Maila Anchal*, the soiled border of India. The region ceases to be an isolated, insulated parochial entity. It becomes a part of a wider world. In a novel written in 1939 Bibhuti Bhusan Benerji of *Pather Panchali* fame, juxtaposed the image of India created by the educated Indian against the perception of the world in which lives Bhanumati a tribal girl from Bihar.

> I felt a desire to know the limits of Bhanumati's world. I asked her, 'have you been to a city?'
>
> 'No, Babuji,' she answered.
>
> 'Have you heard of any city?' I enquired.
>
> 'Gaya, Munger, Patna.'
>
> 'Have you heard of Calcutta?'
>
> 'Yes, I have'.
>
> 'Do you know where is that?'
>
> 'No, Babuji'.
>
> 'Do you know the name of the country where we live?'
>
> 'Oh, yes, we live in the district of Gaya', she said.
>
> 'Haven't you heard of *Bharatvarsha*?' I asked her.
>
> Bhanumati shook her head. She has not heard of it.
>
> She has never been out of Chakmakitola, (the small village in the forest land).
>
> Where is *Bharatvarsha*?

Bhanumati is not only an illiterate tribal; she is also a representative of a lost civilization built long ago by her non-Aryan ancestors. The two characters participating in the dialogue belong to two cultural zones, carrying different perceptions of history, different images of country. One describes his country (*des*) as 'Bharatvarsha' which does not even exist in the knowledge of the other. The debate on the Indian identity and the construction of India will contiue for years to come. For the writers—for us—the most urgent exercise is the constant exploration towards *Bharatvarsha*. Only the discovery of one part leads to the discovery of another part. We who write in Indian languages, may not have the advantages available to major languages,

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or the major language, but the abiding value of a literature comes from a concrete experience of the time and the region. The discovery of the *Bharatvarsha* is also a discovery of our own self, a knowledge of our existence in history. This alone strengthens our convictions and commitments and can give us joy. If writing is not a discovery and a joy why should one write at all.

[Keynote Address delivered at the Annual National Seminar of the Sahitya Akademi, 1994].



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A CREATIVE ENCOUNTER

T.N. Dhar

Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India by Harish Trivedi; Calcutta: Papyrus, 1994; pp. 259; Rs 200.

THE use of English literature as a weapon of political and cultural control by the British in India and its effect on her people and their literatures has increasingly engaged the attention of literary critics in recent years. Since the main inspiration for this has been provided by advances in literary theory and the growing radicalism of the Western academy, the relation between the colonizers and the colonized has been understood largely within constricting, binary paradigms, as a kind of oppositional tie-up, and expressed mostly in heavy and arcane vocabulary. Harish Trivedi's book is a welcome departure from this trend. Within a more pragmatic and less politicized framework, Trivedi views the colonial experience as a transaction, marked by a good deal of give-and-take between the colonizers and the colonized. If the former used English literature to infuse into the Indians an attitude of servility and reverence towards them, their writers could not help being influenced by India, which led to its different representations in their literature. Precisely because of this intricate interconnection of complex and varying shades, which have been dealt with competently by Trivedi in the first two sections of the book, English literature continues to have a disturbing and somewhat culturally embarassing presence in post-independent India. That is why he rounds off his book with an elaborately worked-out model for diminishing the hegemony of English in our literature departments and revitalising them for making them culturally relevant.

Fully conscious of the enormity and complex gamut of the two-way transaction, Trivedi, quite understandably, concentrates on selected authors and texts to

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illustrate its key points. He focusses on Shakespeare, Tagore, Khayyam, Eliot, Forster, and Edward Thompson, in the main, but also discusses the work of a large number of translators and creative writers from within the country, from the nineteenth century to the present. Though each essay in the book is a finished, well-honed, self-contained piece, it also illustrates one of the three major concerns which inform its tri-partite structure. Considering that the essays also differ in the way they have been organized, it would be unfair not to refer to them individually.

The essay on Shakespeare illustrates, lucidly and in great detail, how the poet-dramatist, who in the estimation of the British was as valuable as the Empire, eventually became an instrument for "colonial character-building." It documents the varied ways in which he was received, translated, critiqued, appropriated, and ultimately assimilated by the Indians on his own terms. This accounts for his continued presence in post-independent India, though he no longer shines in lone splendour and has to jostle for space with other world writers. The essay on Khayyam is a fascinating and very erudite historical-cultural exploration into the "triangular British-Indian-Persian connection." Trivedi discusses the translations, re-translations, re-retranslations and several mutations of Khayyam's poetry and the unbelievable though not entirely inexplicable popularity of some versions; he also accounts for their uncanny origins and comments with perspicacity on their distinctive features.

Two essays which deal with the impact and influence of English literature in general and of Eliot in particular on Hindi and other literatures of the country give ample proof of Trivedi's deep and perceptive understanding of their literary traditions. The one on Eliot provides details about how he stimulated the modernist phase in several literatures, including Hindi, illustrating at the same time "the limitations and inadequacies of modernity." We get a vivid graph of how within several decades, Eliot, as poet, critic and intellectual, was translated, transcreated, resisted, and finally flaunted as a fashionable totem. In the second one, which deals exclusively with the influence of English literature on Hindi, Trivedi writes at length about the numerous kinds of translations it stimulated, the new genres it helped come into their own, and the manner in which it shaped the currents of modernity. With detailed reference to the work of stalwarts like Ajneya and Nirmal Verma, he proves how the Hindi writers have outgrown the influence of the British. It is only the academics, especially the ones in English departments, who continue to be in their vicious grip.

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Of the two engaging and revealing essays on Tagore, the first examines his response to the British. Trivedi's contention is that because of personal and historical reasons, Tagore imbibed more of the British influence than was healthy and desirable; this made him into more of an internationalist than a nationalist. Using the categories framed by the poet, he demonstrates how and why he chose to see less of the English nation and more of the race, through its pleasant symbols—Andrews, Pearson and Elmhirst—who became his life-long friends. Several other lesser-known things about his personality and thinking have been brought out in his complex relationship with Thompson, which has also been used to exemplify the interplay between Eastern and Western sensibilities. In the early phase of their friendship, Tagore not only encouraged him to translate his work and write on it, but also commented on his effort with warmth and approval. But soon after Thompson published his second book on his poetry, Tagore became his bitterest foe. He and his supporters attacked him virulently and castigated him for the very things for which he had been praised earlier. Trivedi states that Thompson is fair in his assessment of the poet. Tagore was incensed by it because he thought Thompson was being insolent and irreverent; this was alien to the tradition in which he had been brought up.

If Thompson's critical work is used by Trivedi to see Tagore's person and poetic achievement in a new perspective, his novels are used to deflate the overblown reputation of Forster's *A Passage to India.* In an elaborate and searching comparison of the novel with Thompson's *A Farewell to India,* he demonstrates that in spite of the sustained and multifarious involvement of the two novelists with India, their novels are radically different cultural texts; they dramatize the picture of the Raj "with a different face and complexion." While Forster, through his de-historicized mode, reduces India to a muddle and mystery, Thompson, by giving due space to the political ferment in India against the British, locates it in historical time as a vibrant entity.

Written with a greater degree of pungence, Trivedi's debunking piece on Eliot's *The Waste Land,* proves effectively that his use of Sanskrit in the poem, which has been made much of by critics, especially by Indians, is actually no more than a cleverly-conceived trick, which has misled readers. Eliot, in his view, is no admirer of Indian spirituality; on the contrary, in the poem, "Hinduism and the much vaunted Indian spirituality are seen as sunken against the abiding and exclusive truths of Christianity."

The essay on Byron is heart-warming. After reading it, one feels

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sorry that he could not make it to India. In Trivedi's estimation, and truly so, Byron wrote about the East, that he had known, with unusual sympathy and understanding, on the basis of realistic and authentic information and not on fabulations which were common in his day. His writing is neither exotic nor orientalized, which sets him apart from writers like Southey and Moore. The most remarkable thing about him is that even when he makes concessions to popular taste by dealing with oriental themes, he simultaneously problematizes the practice through clever deconstructions.

Colonial Transactions has several distinguishing and pleasant features. The first one, as I have already tried to show, is the pleasing variety of Trivedi's methodology. He imparts to the writing of criticism the flavour of creative writing and chooses an appropriate mode for each of his essays. If the one on Shakespeare is in the form of an exhaustive and informative historical essay, the one on Khayyam's poetry is a clever piece of literary detection, which surprises by its ever-expanding corpus of recreations; Trivedi also goes into the intricacies of the theory and practice of translatorial activity, helping us overcome in the process the depressing effect of the notions of power and servitude, which theoreticians from the West attach with it. The essays on the influence of English literature on Indian literatures, including Hindi, are rich and rewarding exercises in cross-cultural contact through language, and amply bring out Trivedi's competence in handling literary history. The sweep of these essays contrasts with his concentrated, close reading of *The Waste Land*, which reminds one of the philological scholarship of the most subtle kind. The essay on Thompson and Tagore is an illuminating example of the virtually dying art of tracing literary relationships, which have significant cultural ramifications. In short, there is splendid and commendable variety in Trivedi's writing.

Secondly, in our days of close-circuit critical discourses, Trivedi's book celebrates critical pluralism. He uses all available critical procedures—biographical, historical, formal, socio-cultural, literary, textual, political—to good purpose, for producing fruitful and readable criticism. Without being too obtrusive about it, he also uses vital insights provided by literary theory to address questions of crucial import: the different shades of orientalism; translation, influence and intertextuality; the contending categories of serious and popular literature and the practice and politics of canon-formation. In this, he implicitly, and sometimes even explicitly, joins issues with critics like Edward Said, Gauri Vishwanathan, and several others.

Lastly, and I would say most importantly, Trivedi affirms the

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immense fruitfulness of studying authors and texts in, what he calls, "dislocating, relative and comparative perspective." For a country like India, with multiplicity of languages and literatures, this should be the most practical literary discourse. Trivedi makes it an important part of his post-colonial project, which needs our urgent attention.

Trivedi's book, like many other good books, has its share of problems too; these are implicated in the manner in which it is constituted. One could say that Trivedi does not write exhaustively on the tendencies he wants to highlight in the transaction; he only provides case studies. One could dispute his choice of authors and texts, especially because Tagore, Thompson, and Eliot dominate the book's table of contents, which he admits he found difficult to put into shape. On this count, he could also be censured for diminishing the range and variety of his project. One could blame him for an occasional lapse into critical aggressiveness, when he writes: "But for Eliot, there aren't in this poem (*The Waste Land*), there never were and never would be, any solutions outside Christianity." All these objections look flimsy, when compared with the solidity of Trivedi's achievement. He is so thorough and pursuasive in whatever he writes that it is difficult not to agree with him. Besides, he gives one the feeling that writing criticism is not just a sterile academic exercise, but a joyful and fruitful activity, which can be shared with people who are interested in literature. This makes *Colonial Transactions* a delightful amalgam of scholarship and interpretation. Written in a clear, witty and lively style, it is an enjoyable reading. □

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THE IDEA OF INDIANNESS

Motilal Jotwani

Facets of Indian Literature by K.M. George, Karimpumannil Publishers, Trivandrum, 1994, pp. x + 159, Rs. 90.

WITH the publication of K.M. George's *Facets of Indian Literature* the idea of unity of Indian literature which was in the background has finally arrived and come to the fore, the confident way replacing the waverings in the matter.

It is only in the fitness of things that K.M. George in his preface to the book remembers Jawaharlal Nehru and his words: he quotes him saying that every person of India who claims to be educated should be acquainted not only with the literature of his own language, but also with the classics and famous books written in the languages of the country other than his own.

The book rightly recalls, it all began with Jawaharlal Nehru and S. Radhakrishnan, who unmistakably pointed towards the unity of Indian literature and referred to the languages of India as having their root and inspiration in a common source (see their forewords to *History of Bengali Literature* and *Contemporary Indian Literature* respectively). But, as thing in a broad-based democracy would have it, some scholars like Niharranjan Ray expressed their doubt and argued to the contrary about it. It is on these occasions that the unitarians, or the votaries of unity of Indian Literature, felt unhappy and emitted long deep audible breath expressive of "nope, it won't do." Soon, somebody like V.K. Gokak would rise to the occasion and reassure them. In his foreword to the book *Three Decades : A Short History of Sahitya Akademi* V.K. Gokak declared, "The main business of the Sahitya Akademi is to promote the unity of Indian literature. This is a tangible aim and the founding fathers of the Akademi emphasised it." And the people who appreciated the basic cultural unity of India

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and wished to see their country being one great nation supported it, saying, "Yea, we keep it up."

The basis of the book under review was formulated in 1991 when George delivered a series of seven lectures at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. Representing as the book does the seven lectures on various facets of Indian literature, it discusses between its two covers the linguistic variety, folk and classical literature, Bhakti literature, literary renaissance and flowering of modernity, social and political concerns, discovery of the Indian literature and literary integration, which is a national need. It seems, it concludes the debate on the issue of our being one nation and having one national literature, though written in many languages (and if we extend the famous dictum) and many scripts. Besides, it underlines the need of having in India educated persons of Jawaharlal Nehru's conception. For, as U.R. Anantha Murthy rightly observes in his foreword to the book, "most of us know more of even what is second-rate in European literature than of classics in Indian language".

The book celebrates the spirit of unity lying at the basis of rich diversity in Indian literature. □

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A Banquet Of Memories

Unny

Ormakalude Virunnu (Mal.), V.K. Madhavankutty, Kottayam, D.C. Books, 1994.

THE Malayali reader rejects more readily than he accepts. While at the pulp end of the state's wide readership formulas and trends keep shifting in tune with the market, the serious reader goes about his business armed to the teeth with constantly updated state-of-the-art tools of criticism. The latter is even quicker on the draw if the work under consideration has the slightest suggestion of historicity. For, the literary Malayali is particularly touchy about history. He can go into hair-splitting dissections on historiography and come to unsparing judgements on the author's ideological moorings and intentions.

It is in this surcharged atmosphere that Madhavankutty has ventured to take an autobiographical look at Malabar in the socially and politically significant decades around independence. Fully alert to the minefield he is stepping into, the author takes anticipatory bail by declaring right at the outset that his account is a free blend of fact and fiction. Quite an admission from a seasoned journalist who has reported for close to four decades from the national capital for the premier Malayalam daily, *Mathrubhumi*.

In fact such disalarming candour runs through the account, marked by a certain readiness to mock oneself and one's close familial and community circles. What constitutes the body of the work is a series of cameos of people and events the author grew up with. Narrated with a raconteur's flourish, these defy paraphrasing and translation. Madhavankutty treads gingerly between the literary and the journalese.

The collapse of the Nair joint family is recurring theme in Kerala's fiction and cinema. Even today, rather anachronistically, feudal decline seems to obsess the Malayali mind. Nostalgia remains

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a sure winner. The proponents of high art and literature tire easily of the non-arty present and keep harking back to the good, old and quaintly morbid days. With compulsive intensity. The author mercifully does not rub it in. He follows the story teller's urge to recount anecdotes. His unambitious use of language is a great help here. He writes in a manner that does not draw attention to itself. A rare feat in contemporary Malayalam. Also risky, because you can be seen as non-serious if you write less than dense prose.

In this literate state, even for mass appeal you have to perform a linguistic circus of a different sort. The popular serial writer has his own pulp package of metaphors and phraseology to draw upon. His serious counterpart mixes metaphors more inventively. Either way 'language' is constructed as an opaque or at best a translucent shield between the reader and the read.

Madhavankutty writes in such a chatty manner that you hardly sense 'language.' You almost hear him narrate. Namboodiri's fine line work provides the perfect foil. The masterly illustrator, seasoned by over three decades of visualising Malayalam fiction, captures the mood with the ease that comes naturally to the veteran. □

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INDIA AND ENGLISH

M.K. Naik

1

Rethinking English : Essays in Literature, Language, History, ed. Swati Joshi, New Delhi : Trianka, 1991, 348 pp., Rs. 280/-

ENGLISH has been ('too much', as some people think) with us for more than a century and a quarter since the establishment of the earliest Universities in India in 1857; but the problem of English in India has seriously engaged the attention of Indian scholars mostly after Independence. Mulk Raj Anand's *The King Emperor's English*, or *The Role of the English Language in India* (1947), A.R. Wadia's *The Future of English in India* (1955), V.K. Gokak's *English in India : its Present and Future* (1964) and B.B. Kachru's *The Indianization of English : The English Language in India* (1981) have been some of the notable attempts in this direction so far.

Fortyfive years is, of course, only a very brief episode in the history of a country—especially in that of one, which during the five thousand years of its existence, has perhaps made more history than it can consume fully (to use a phrase from Saki in another context). Nevertheless, the last half century has witnessed such sweeping changes in our country, particularly in the social, cultural and economic spheres, that the problem of English in India has kept on assuming fresh dimensions, with the passing of time.

Rethinking English is therefore a welcome addition to studies of its kind, and all the more so, because, while its predecessors mostly adopted a rather limited, pedagogical, linguistic and literary approach to the subject. This collection has distinct, inter-disciplinary orientation, which has certainly made a fuller and more complex kind of an enquiry possible. As the Editor, Swati Joshi points out in her Introduction, 'Our growing sense of dislocation within our disciplines,

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and an even greater sense of bedevilment at the contradictions and crises of the time we are living in have left us with many questions concerning our academic engagement and its relation to our historical situation as well as the nature of political and cultural processes in our contemporary society.'

The nine essays in the collection offer different perspectives on the role of English in India today, yesterday and tomorrow. In her 'Relating Histories : Definitions of Literacy, Literature, Gender in Early Nineteenth Century Calcutta and England', Kumkum Sangari carries her argument beyond the boundaries of English studies in India, and examines how 'colonial states and cultural formations established under the aegis of imperialism' produce specifiable ideological configurations which loop and spread across 'national' boundaries. Tejaswini Niranjana's 'Translation, Colonialism, and the rise of English' scrutinizes the role of translation in the entire colonial situation. The impact of English studies on the early expressions of nationalism in Bengali literature is the theme of Josadhara Bagchi's 'Shakespeare in Loin cloths.' Susie Tharu's main concern in her 'The Arrangement of an Alliance' is the complex relationship between English literature and literatures in the modern Indian languages. Covering partly the same ground in his 'Reading English, Writing Hindi', Harish Trivedi restricts his enquiry to modern Hindi literature. Aijaz Ahmad's 'Disciplinary English : Third-Worldism and Literature' outlines the difficulties in thinking about 'Third World Literature' in general and 'Indian literature' in particular as theoretically coherent catagories, and recounts the sins of commission and omission of English Departments in India in compounding these difficulties. Badri Raina's note on 'Language and the Politics of English in India' decries the primacy of English in the Indian Corridors of Power and urges English users to remake their psyches in accepting Hindi instead. The dire predicament of the English teacher working in a mofussil environment is the theme of Alok Rai in his 'Out Here : An English Teacher in the Provinces'; and an entirely novel perspective on the subject is provided by the last essay: 'English Textbook, Indian Publisher', by Urvashi Butalia, who looks at the whole question through the eyes of one in the publishing industry, and in the process provides some interesting insights on the role of the publisher in the Indo-British colonial encounter.

While the main strength of the collection evidently lies, as this brief over-view shows, in its open, inter-disciplinary approach to its subject one wonders whether, paradoxically though, it does not, at the same time constitute its major weakness also. First, in their obvious

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zeal to adopt a fresh perspective, most of the contributors seem to ignore almost altogether two vital questions, which have certainly been discussed in detail previously, but on which fresh thinking is not only possible, but actually very necessary, even today number one, the teaching of the English Language versus the teaching of English Literature, and number two, the question of creative writing in English by Indians. Surely, in spite of the burning crusading zeal of ELT specialists—or, perhaps precisely because of it—the last word on the Language versus Literature controversy has not yet been said; and is it not rather late in the day to dismiss all Indian English literature as 'the so-called Indo-Anglian literature, itself a half-caste off-spring of English literature' (p. 202). (Believe it or not—this snide reference is virtually the only consideration of the question the entire collection offers).

But the damage does not seem to be restricted to these palpable sins of ommision alone. Manifestly carried away by their inter-disciplinary zeal, many of the contributors appear to write in a style chokeful of abstract jargon, which can only result in near-opaque writing, hindering effortless communication. 'The philosopheme of translation grounds a multiplicity of discourses' (p. 141); 'noting the structural and semantic adjacency of the private sphere' (p. 114); 'The continuity posited between literature and local knowledge ... allows literature to be placed simultaneously in an explicit instrumentality, in governmental or other power structures' (P. 61); 'Although a considered historical deconstruction of the complex grid of motives that informed the colonial decision to introduce English to India dates back ...' (p. 271)—are some examples culled at random. Surely, at least students of English language and literature should know that there is something more to style than a steady parade of abstract generalities which sound scholarly. (On pp. 32-33, there are even two sentences which run to nine and eight lines respectively). It is all the more sad that sharp young minds which have many a subtle insight to offer, should often couch it in a style which appears to prize obfuscation as ornament and difficulty as distinction.

One also notices that there is a mistake in transliteration in the reference to Tarabai Shinde's book, *Stri Purush Tulana* on page 168, wherein *Tulana* ('comparison' in Marathi) has been unwittingly subjected to frying (Talana) by an obviously non-Marathi writer. And there is probably a Freudian slip on page 161 (repeated on p. 175, footnote 5), when Professor S. Nagarajan's name is cited as S.R. Nagarajan. Is the author an ardent admirer (like this reviewer) of Sachin (S.R.) Tendulkar?

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Forster And Further : The Tradition of Anglo-Indian Fiction by Sujit Mukherjee, Bombay: Orient Longman, 1993, 304 pp., Rs. 175/-

ANGLO-INDIAN fiction, which is the other side of the coin that is Indian fiction in English, had until recently received more attention from Western critics than from their Indian counterparts. Fortunately the situation is changing fast and during the last decade a number of studies of this body of writing have appeared in India. Sujit Mukherjee's interest in the subject probably dates from the seventies when he contributed a perceptive paper ('Edward Thompson: A Prisoner of India') to *The Image of India in Western Creative Writing* (Dharwar : Karnatak University, 1971). As he tells us in his 'Preamble', 'For the last twenty years or more, everytime I wanted to write this book somebody else wrote it.' Alluding to recent studies by Indian scholars, he adds, 'alarmed by such competition—and that too, from close quarters—I have hastened to put together in this book discussion that relate to certain smaller provinces of special interest contained within the wider subcontinent of Anglo-India.' And it is possible to suggest that it is precisely this that constitutes at once the main strength and the major weakness of the book.

Of the ten chapters in the book, the first two are devoted to an overview of Anglo-Indian fiction, in which the primacy of E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is rightly emphasized. The remaining chapters discuss various aspects of Anglo-Indian fiction such as the images in it of the Indian Princes, the Muslims, the Eurasians, the English women attracted to Indian males, and the Englishmen who chose to 'stay on' after Indian Independence. In addition to this, there are two chapters which deal with 'Tiger shooting in British India and Anglo-Indian fiction and the fiction of Edward Thompson' respectively, while there is also an Appendix, which contains an interesting discussion of India in American fiction.

As this brief summary indicates, the book makes no attempt to present a central thesis logically developed, offering instead considerations of some prominent aspects of the subject. These considerations are certainly useful because they do show the author's thorough knowledge of the subject and his ability to see his subject 'steadily' (though not perhaps see it 'whole'); but at the same time, they seldom appear to offer any new insights—a lacuna inevitable in a study unendowed with the shaping spirit of a central vision, which may sometimes

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interpret existing facts in new ways, throwing a fresh light on the subject.

Some of the author's judgments are also open to question. For instance, he avers that the tradition of Anglo-Indian fiction 'may be said to have begun with Eliza Hamilton's *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796); but *The Disinterested Nabob* (1785) had appeared more than a decade earlier. It is also difficult to accept his claim (though in fairness to him, it must be admitted that he qualifies it with a politic 'almost') that Paul Scott's *The Birds of Paradise* is a 'definitive' novel about the Indian princes. It is possible to argue that in spite of Kipling's *Naulakha* and M.K. Kaye's *The Far Pavilions* on the one hand and Mulk Raj Anand's *The Private Life of an Indian Prince* and Manohar Malgonkar's *The Princes* on the other, the 'definitive' novel about the Indian princes which does full justice to so complex a subject is perhaps yet to be written. One also notices that though he does point out at one place a howler or two committed by Paul Scott (e.g. Kasim addresses Sir George as 'Governorji' in *The Day of the Scorpion*), on the whole, the author is silent on the question of the countless misrepresentation some—of which are quite serious—of which almost all Anglo-Indian novelist, including the best of them like Kipling and Forster are guilty.

The Publisher's blurb describes the book as a 'Scholarly but informal work'. Revealing as it does, a mind steeped in the subject, this study is certainly rewarding, especially in that it should induce the discering reader to read many a half-forgotten novel about India by a British writer. There are occasional touches of mordant wit, as when, after noting that at a tiger hunt, Lord Curzon failed to hit his mark, in spite of repeated attempts, Mukherjee comments, 'Obviously he was not as superior a marksman as he was a person'. Nevertheless, though *Forster and Further* does take us round the extensive realms of Anglo-Indian fiction, and show us numerous sights, frequently commenting authoritatively on what is shown, one ultimately wishes the author had taken us further still, and tried to make us see more in what he sought to make us see. □

3

Between Tears and Laughter by Mulk Raj Anand, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992. 130 pp. Hardback ed., Rs. 125; paper-covered ed. Rs. 45/-

MANY of Mulk Raj Anand's numerous short story collections are probably out of print now, and they certainly deserve to be

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reprinted but if literary excellence were to be the sole criterion, *Between Tears and Laughter*, which was first published in 1973, should hardly have taken precedence over collections like *The Lost Child and Other Stories* (1934) or *The Barber's Trade Union and Other Stories* (1944), though the present collection does have its own saving graces.

Between Tears and Laughter is a collection of twentyone short stories, with mostly a rural setting. Their themes are mostly drawn from Anand's usual concerns: viz. traditional Indian mores and practices and their inhibiting and frequently destructive impact upon vulnerable members of Indian society; the plight of the under-privileged, including women—young and old, married and widowed—in traditional households, the rural poor, the untouchables and the maimed and disabled; the ironies of world of politics and the realm of officialdom; and the 'lyric awareness' of the simple and charming world of animal life.

Traditional religious practices, frequently encrusted with meaning less ritual and harmful superstition provide the central theme of stories like 'Savitri', 'Sati Sāpni', 'The Murder of Dawn', 'Blessed are the Learned' and 'A Tiff over the Tonsures.' The first two stories offer contrasting variations on the motif of widow-burning. In 'Savitri', an educated young rustic widow is forced to commit *sati*, simply because she has the misfortune to bear the name of the mythical Savitri, who brought back her husband from the jaws of Death; while 'Sati Sāpni' illustrates how easily myth can be concocted in a land where the threshold of credibility is unusually low, and turned into a fruitful source of profit by the unscrupulous; a clever snake-charmer fakes a fire-immolation by a she-snake, and the myth of the 'Sati Sāpni' is created with a shrine being built up on the holy spot, and the snake-charmer becoming the priest. In 'The Murder of Dawn' during a famine, a peasant, in a fit of drunken derangement, kills his small daughter, offering her as a scrifice to Goddess Kali, and he is abetted in this by a fanatic priest. The story ends on a note of grim irony: at his trial, the peasant is 'not found guilty' because the prosecuting lawyer has also dreamt of the goddess exhorting him not to punish the peasant. The irony in 'Blessed are the Learned' and 'A Tiff over the Tonsures' is, however, playful in tone. In the former story, the narrator returning to his village after studying abroad, finds himself made a guest of honour at a 'Worship of the Ink-pot' ceremony held as a tribute to his achievement. At the end, he receives the holy ink-pot as a gift, and he concludes by telling us, 'The strange thing is that it never dries never runs dry ... that is perhaps why I have written so many words.' 'A Tiff over Tonsures'

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recounts the story of the quarrel between the 'official' barbers at a temple town and rebel Hair-cutting Saloon owners.

The long-suffering woman as victim in a traditional rustic household, with its rigid, stultifying code of conduct is a persistent archetype in Anand's fiction. Several variations on this are exemplified in the stories here. In the title-story, 'Between Tears and Laughter', young Savirti, ill-treated by her mother-in-law and abandoned by her husband, is reduced, along with her two small children, to starvation during a famine and becomes hysterical; while 'mained, lamed' old Gujri finds herself branded as a witch and starved by her daughter-in-law.

An untouchable is the protagonist in three stories: 'The Dreamer', 'The Sinful Life and Death of Tinkori' and 'The Man who wanted to change his Name'. The contrast between the author's treatment of the untouchable boy, Kania in the first story and his counterpart, Tinkori in the second is highly revealing. When a writer, humanitarian by conviction, writes about the under-privileged, he is always in the danger of unwittingly treading the primrose path of sentimentality. Anand's chronicle of Tinkori is an apt illustration of this. Here is a story that moves rather mechanically into predeterminate grooves: the poor untouchable urchin beaten to death by the upper-cast villain for the grave crime of stealing a couple of carrots from the latter's farm. It is irony—that never failing antidote to easy sentimentality that is the saving grace of 'The Dreamer.' The protagonist here is something more than the conventional victim; his being a dreamer who invents a new personality for himself endows the story with an extra dimension which saves it from being merely a conventional chronicle of the exploited. This is also true, to a lesser extent of 'The Man who wanted to change his Name.' Here, 'Do Kauri', (two shells), the untouchable school-teacher dreams of bettering his lot, changing his name to 'Gautama' being only the first step in this direction.

But irony is effective only as long as it preserves the sharpness of its edge and the delicateness of its thrust. Losing these it may get transformed into heavy-handed satire. This is what appears to happen in the exposure of the ways of bureaucracy in 'Bhoodan' and the take-off on the ways of politicians in 'Pension for a Prostitute.'

The animal world has always fascinated Anand, either as a separate universe, complete in itself, or as providing parables for the human condition, the 'Five Short Fables' in *The Power of Darkness and Other Stories* (1959) being excellent examples of the latter. The four 'animal stories' in the present collection seem to fall into two contrast-

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ing groups of another kind. 'Little Chicks' and 'The Rabbit' have very little narrative content as such; they are simply vignettes of small harmless animals engaged in the instinctive task of sheer survival in a generally hostile world. These two stories certainly show that fine 'lyric awareness' with which Anand's best stories are imbued, wherein there is no whiff of sentimentality to spoil the purity of a deeply felt emotional and imaginative experience. In contrast, in 'A Dog's Life' and 'Poem of Pity', we find the author slobbering rather crudely over the death of a mongrel dog and a buffalow, respectively, with conventional motifs setting in motion conventional responses.

The better stories in the collection do reveal Anand's usual narrative flair, though the discerning reader might feel that 'Night falls on Shiva's Hill' (with its title borrowed from Edward Thompson's well-known novel) could have done with more narrative ballast, while 'May the Ridge Rise' is rather too slight to rise above more than mere anecdotage.

His bold use of words, phrases, idioms and imagery drawn from his native Punjabi or Hindi and translated directly into English has always been the hall-mark of Anand's style. His prose here, as elsewhere offers an object lesson in the vital difference between the touching of the deeper springs of emotion and the mere stirring of facile sentiment, and the way this difference is actually reflected in expression. When he is inclined to succumb to mere sentimentality, the author mostly indulges in over-writing as in, 'a whine ... like a spiralling broken lava, shooting into the sky and then falling into the tympanum of every one's ears like a fearful wail' (the curious mixing of metaphors here itself indicates authorial confusion). On the other hand, when Anand is able to draw upon the deep well of his emotionality, and at the same time can enlist the support of his creative imagination, his words become suddenly charged with the concentrated force of lapidary expression as in this description of old Gujri: 'hunched by sixty years of fate.'

One hopes that the re-publication of *Between Tears and Laughter* is only a beginning, which will, in due course, lead to the re-issue of Anand's other important collections of short stories so that his work in this genre, which certainly constitutes a major achievement, remains easily accessible to the new generation of readers. □

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A Comic Fantasy

N.P. Singh

THE DRUNK TANTRA by Ranga Rao, Penguin,1994, pp. 240, Rs. 100/-

RANGA RAO made his mark as a novelist through *Fowl Filcher* (Penguin, 1987) which has been described by *Sunday Mail* as "a delightful journey through the small towns and villages of India." *The Drunk Tantra* is his second novel which is a comic refraction of the world within and outside a prestigious college in the metropolis. The world within the college is both an authentic mirror and a cruel parody of the world outside in which the struggle for power and pelf has both its victors and victims. While Hairy is the victor in the power game, Mr. Dash is a hapless victim. While Hairy is a tiger on the prowl, Mr. Dash is a lamb that perishes without much struggle.

Nature, however, has its own nemesis and retribution. Hairy is abundantly successful in grabbing power and prestige as the Principal of the college but his manly—and somewhat adolescent dream of sleeping with just 108 women leads to a nightmare both as a male and as a figure of authority in the family. It is Mohana who is the narrator, the "I" in the grotesque tale and the unfolding of the bizarre narrative leads to her initiation into the adult game of power and pelf. She is the person who is most distressed at the fading away of the old-fashioned idealist Mr. Dash and the emergence of Hairy, the careerist and the most crooked manipulator. She could also be described as the moral fulcrum of the grotesque and bawdy tale. It is she who is touched and ennobled by the presence of the college watchman, and his commitment to probity, self-discipline and a cheerful sense of duty.

It is Mohana, the narrator, who is always in search of Begampuram—a sort of utopia that doesn't exist anywhere either within or outside the College. It is, perhaps, the world outside the college that

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determines and shapes—or misshapes the world within the college. Far from being an agent of change and social transformation, the college has become a cruel copy of the larger world around. Seen from this perspective, *The Drunk Tantra* provides a double projection of the world around, heightening and underlining man's lust for power, prestige and sexual conquests. It is through Hairy's somewhat adolescent sexual conquests and concomitant impotence that the adult game of grabbing more and more is subverted and challenged.

Therein lies the triumph and art of Ranga Rao whose grotesque, bawdy tale is also a superb fantasy and a hilarious comedy. The rise and fall of Hairy, the master manipulator and crook, is the tragi-comedy of the man of our time. In trying to grab more and more, he trips and falls. The novel is warmly recommended to all lovers of literature and sanity—a rather scarce commodity in the post-colonial or neo-colonial (?) contemporary world riven by fractured dreams and harrowing nightmares. □

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CHRONICLING ORISSAN RENAISSANCE

Bibhuti Mishra

DESHA KALA PATRA by Jagannath Prasad Das, Prachi Prakashan, 1992; pp. 600; Rs. 130/-.

"THE past is a foreign country; they do things differently there" — this remark of the British novelist L.P. Hartley underscores the tremendous fascination the past has for all of us. But the very nature of the bygone is such that in attempting to recreate it the writer must necessarily, in part, invent it, must show a certain bias, for, writing of history is nothing if not an interpretation of life. It is here that J.P. Das shows remarkable creativity in his magnum opus in Oriya *Desha Kala Patra*.

Desha Kala Patra (Country Time Character) chronicles the eventful second half of the 19th century Orissa. It was a period of misfortunes and debacles; it was a period of resurgence and progress, too. This tableau of bad times and good times goes by the name of Orissan renaissance and Das in his tome presents a well-documented and absorbing account of the same.

The book which is divided into 13 chapters, spans a period of forty-eight years—from December, 1859 to July, 1907. It needs to be emphasised that though it tells the story of the past, the book is not history in the conventional sense. While according to the author the closest approximation to the truth possible has been his aim, the book is certainly not an exhaustive account of the latter half of the 19th century in Orissan history: For one it takes mainly some places like Cuttack, Puri and Balasore, the nervecentres of the then Orissa, as the setting and for another its aim is to explain that time by focussing on the major events and characters of that time. So it is neither history nor historical fiction; it is a tertium quid.

What immediately appears appealing is the style of the book. Written in the form of a diary the book opens with the section titled

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'Puri: December, 1859.' It imaginatively reconstructs the fading days in the life of the Puri king who is bed-ridden with a terminal illness. In fact the story of the Puri royal family constitutes a significant thread in the warp and the weft of the fabric of narration. Some of the other vital threads are the severe famine of 1866, the various facets of the British rule, the resurgence of Oriya language and literature, the reversal in the fortunes of the world-famous Puri temple, and the socio-religio-cultural life of the then Orissa.

It is well said that historical writing is a criticism of the mistakes and omissions without appearing to be critical. Thus while detailing the scenario leading up to the tragedy that was the 1866 Famine the story holds Commissioner T.E. Ravenshaw culpable. Ravenshaw, with a horrible lack of foresight, lived in a fool's paradise as is evident from this reply he gives to the letter of Puri Collector Barlow who had tried to impress upon him the necessity of bringing in shiploads of rice from outside to counter the extreme scarcity of food.

Cuttak
14 November, 1865

Dear Barlow,

Your letter regarding the dismal situation in Parikud and Malud to hand. I think your informant has given you an exaggerated version of the reality

★ ★ ★

Please persuade the *Zamindars* to do their duty. They should not let the government bear all the burden. Always look to the bright side and don't let the people lose hope ... I'm sure the famine can be averted.

★ ★ ★

It seems rain is in the offing; we are quite hopeful.

Perhaps if you investigate further you would find out that the situation in the Chilka area is not very bad ...

Yours faithfully
T.E. Ravenshaw

Barely three months after this, the worst famine in the history of Orissa hit the state leaving hundreds of thousands dead!

While letters add a touch of authenticity to the narrative, the

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various episodes and anecdotes packed into the narrative make it an absorbing read, almost like fiction. The following excerpt on the fraudulence of the Puri *pandas* (temple priests)—

Kashi (a Puri Panda) said, "Come, I shall show you another miracle. You might be highly qualified, but you're a sinner! So you won't be able to see Lord Jagannath even if you stand before him." When historian Rajendralal Mitra couldn't see the Lord he was frightened and closed his eyes in prayer. When after a while he opened his eyes he could clearly see the deities. It was miraculous! ... On the day before his departure from Puri, Rajendralal again went inside the temple. He asked Kashi to lead him to the inner sanctum. He closed his eyes and holding Kashi's hand went inside. When he opened his eyes, he could clearly see the Lord. Actually on the previous days he had come into the dark sanctum from the bright sunshine outside; so he could not see anything. But when he came with closed eyes there was no such problem ... when Rajendralal told his junior Radhika Prasad of this happening, the later laughed and said "I could have explained the "miracle" to you had you asked me earlier. You don't know how deceitful these *pandas* are!" (rendering into English—Bibhuti Mishra)

The book is replete with many momentous events connected with the blossoming of Oriya literature and journalism. On the publication of *Utkal Dipika*, the earliest and foremost Oriya periodical—

"On August 4, 1866 (Shravana 22, 1273) appeared the first Oriya magazine *Utkal Dipika*. It was lithographed and its price was four annas. Every literate man in Cuttack had a *Utkal Dipika* in his hand on that day. In this maiden issue there was a special report on the famine and the omissions in the relief work were pointed out for redressal. People realised that the periodical would act as a Conscience-keeper for Orissa." (Tr.-Bibhuti Mishra)

Many a luminaries, literary and otherwise find a mention in the pages of *Desha Kala Patra*. With tit-bits from personal life thrown in in good measure, the narrative brings these eminent characters endearingly close to the modern readers. The narrator is the nineteenth century Orissa or Time, the great leveller; so there is no attempt to put the 'legends' on pedestals. This is a speciality of Das's narrative technique. Some of the characters who make the pages lively are the astronomer Samanta Chandrasekhar, the printer-publisher Gouri Shankar Ray, the poet Radhanath Ray, the father of Oriya novels Fakir Mohan Senapati, the legendary advocate and social worker Madhubabu etc. Some foreigners like Ravenshaw and John Beams too play a great role in adding vibrancy to the presentation.

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The reader becomes privy to even the inner-most thoughts of the characters at times and thus not only reads but also 'lives in' the nineteenth century Orissa as long as the reading lasts.

Simplicity of language and the clarity and coherence in presentation have always been the hallmarks of Das's writings. Though obviously a lot of painstaking research has gone into the preparation of the book, the author dispenses with any 'References' section, perhaps to avoid making it appear like a thesis. It is well-documented without a trace of the monotony of documentaries. Chronology is maintained although there is a fast change in time and setting from section to section. Deft handling of events and persons ensures a feeling of sustained onrush of life and experiences.

There is a strong note of humour and irony, nowhere more manifest than in the delineation of the uncanny hold exercised on Puri king by one 'Khandi' or 'The Maimed Woman'—

"One day 'Khandi' came sobbing to Mukunda (the King) and complained against the boys who were teasing her by calling her 'Khandi'. Mukunda declared that henceforth she would be called 'Pata ma' (the queen mother) ... The boys went around the town ridiculing this order. They said, 'From now on pigs would be called bears!'"

Not only by its content but also because of its neat get-up the book is a milestone in Oriya publication. Proof-reading however could have done with a bit more attention. □

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POETICS—GREEK AND INDIAN

V.Y. Kantak

DRAMATIC CONCEPTS, GREEK AND INDIAN, A study of the *Poetics* and the Natyashastra by Bharat Gupt.

IT is a daunting task that the book attempts. And the author addresses himself to it with the kind of intellectual equipment such a study demands. He has the needed language competence in both Sanskrit and Greek and an in-depth knowledge of the two ancient drama traditions along with their dramaturgies and relevant background of aesthetics. So also, his knowledge of both the Indian and the European systems of music adds a dimension. What is equally important, he approaches the subject from a recognizably modern critical outlook. Of the *Natyashastra* itself he proposes to offer a re-valuation, considering the topic in "the perspective of contemporary thinking on the performing arts *to highlight its present-day utility.*" In this respect, however, there is a slight but significant difference between the two dramatic traditions. The ancient Greek drama stands wholly unconnected with the modern theatre in the West. In India, while the urban theatre is strongly influenced by the modern Western model, the older Indian tradition still survives in rural forms like *Bhavai, Kathakali, Kudiyattam, Yatra.* This aspect is only briefly taken cognizance of here since its elaboration isn't within the scope of the undertaking.

The main thesis which is well-maintained is to place ancient Greek and Indian drama, both theory and practice, in the broad "frame-work of the ancient Indo-European culture", as the art of *hieropraxis* or sacred drama. Of the two, Greek drama began semiotically but in its later European phase tapered into the lexical, "while the Indian system has remained semiotic through and through." The implication is that several common misconceptions need to be corrected. For instance, *Poetics* and *Natyashastra* are seen to be, not theore-

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tic statements, so much as manuals for performance modes of sacred drama using certain synaesthetic techniques of music, dance, and semeotic gesture—the emphasis being on the technique of production and not on the lexical structures or *genres* like tragedy, comedy or *dasharupakas*. This is, in a way, the centre or core of the book along with its supportive factors ably set out and elaborated.

The study brings out the unity between the visual and the aural that had always existed in the theatre. It did not concede primacy to speech but developed a semiotics of sign language of codified gestures and body movements which had well known meanings in their cultural context. Dance was a part of this visual content. And the aural content had a wide range, such as stylised speech, declamation, song-dialogue, besides music. The theatrical reality so produced did not reflect upon the world beyond theatre but was designed to be absorbing in itself. All of which leads to the speculation how that earlier unity comes to be disrupted and *festive drama* comes to an end with the drive towards the de-sacralized culture of a non-festive society. Altogether, this first part of the book makes its point effectively adding perceptive discussions on the date of the *Natyashastra*, on Indo-European beliefs in drama, and on drama as Festive Ritual.

Part II, the main body of the work, deals with the theoretical projections and techniques that figure in *Poetics* in comparison with those in *Natyashastra* bringing out the differences. On the concept of imitation, it is cogently argued, the difference is that in Aristotle's *Mimesis* the copy, directly or indirectly, has to play a sort of subordinate role in relation to the original, while अनुकरण is freed from that kind of nexus with the world. First of all, it isn't only men in action that drama imitates, but men, *asuras* and *devatas* as well—it being त्रैलोक्यावस्थानुकरण. In the process, imitation creates a new world independent and self-sufficient; the "model" is all but forgotten. The "unsplintered" use of the channels of music, dance, speech, and semiotic codes of gesture and body movement implies as much. The point is closely argued through out.

The same scrupulousness and perspicacity marks the treatment of "the Medium of Imitation लीलांगहाराभिनय, following it up with whole sections on Theatre space, the Visual content, the Aural content, and Dramatic Genres—all replete with discriminating well-documented discussions offering useful classifications, scholarly information, and comment. Of special significance are sections on अभिनय—*angika, vachika, aharya* and *sattvika*. The range is very wide and areas of agreement and disagreement between the two ancient systems on points of dramaturgy are taken up in great detail. One's impression is that

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hardly any area is left untouched. This is true of the last part, Part III, as well, which focusses on the Aristotelian concept of *katharsis* vis-a-vis what could be its Indian counterpart such as is involved in the notion of "emotional arousal" and *rasa*. Which brings the study to a close with opposite references to a variety of Indian aestheticians—Lollata, Sankuka, Bhattanayaka and Abhinavagupta.

Perhaps, one or two topics of special interest dealt with in the course of Parts II and III might serve to indicate the quality of the insightful discussions the book offers. These are also notable examples of the author's originality of outlook and resourcefulness. Such is the masterly way the puzzling question of *Lokadharmi* and *Natyadharmi* styles of presentation is being tackled. The author is aware, this is the kind of difficulty which is partly terminological but partly relating to a way of feeling now lost (as it happens with सात्विकी भाव or सात्विक अभिनय). He effectively counters two very common misconceptions—one, that *lokadharmi* stands for the folk-art mode; and two, that it denotes a realistic style of presentation. As to the first, he points out that divisions of art-forms and culture like *lakodharmi* versus *natyadharmi, margi* versus *deshi*, folk versus classical would be anachronistic and simply could not have existed before the process of industrialization created modern conditions. And as to the second assumption interpreting *lokadharmi* as realistic histrionics, it is obvious that both *dharmis* and *natya* as expressly stated by *Natyashastra* committed to using the same medium of लीलांगहाराभिनय and the semiotic code involved. However, since eminent scholars like M.M. Ghosh and Kapila Vatsayana have considered *lokadharmi* as "realistic" Gupt clinches the matter quoting Bharata and Abhinava extensively to show how specificity could be ascribed to *lokadharmi* only on two grounds—firstly, that it renders actions as described in stories transmitted through tradition without change and embellishments; and secondly, that it enacts the *usual* ways of men and women. The discussion resolves itself to this: The *lokadharmi* is a simple unembellished enactment of normal behaviour of people as described in the traditionally transmitted stories—women's roles being enacted by women, and so on. While *natyadharmi* is a highly embellished enactment representing the farthest take off in imagination. The difference seems to lie in the degree or level of artistic sophistication, in the symbolic and transforming power.

In another instance, highlighting the function of "Dhruva songs", the study makes a unique contribution—what is possibly an important piece of research. An apparently peripheral detail of technique turns out to be of central dramatic import. The Dhruva songs of the Indian

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dramaturgy were something of a counterpart to the Greek Chorus, though they weren't scripted by the author but inserted by the producer at certain points of the performance—prescriptively, at entry and exit of character, end of Act, preceding a violent disturbance or a sudden unexpected (आक्षेपिकी) change of mood. These danced songs did not relate to the immediate dramatic event but were like independent compositions describing the sun, moon, sky, clouds, the sea, swans, elephants, bees, the cuckoo and the like. Meant to reflect upon the emotional state, they provided a wider, more universal background of nature through *analogy* rather than *mimesis*. Thus, for instance, a destructive wind shrieking and uprooting trees may be evoked by the danced song, to usher in a furious ascetic upon the stage or a Prince setting out to combat. Similarly, a lady swan full of desire, anxious to leave the woods to wander in sport with her companion may presage a Vasantasena's setting out to meet her Charudatta ... And in these ways, help to guide the audience's response in the right direction.

Thus the "Dhruva songs" must bring on the stage the whole world of nature through simulators (उपमाना) like sun, moon, mountain, bees and cuckoos ... to focus "men in action." For man is not an intrusion upon Nature; but that "Nature, both स्थावर and जंगम, is seen to be melted (लीन) in the same *bhavas* which are neither of Man nor of Nature but of the Cosmos. Man and nature are thus made to reflect the same reality."

These two instances, then, might give one some idea of the quality of the rare contribution this book makes to Indic studies. Here is a scholarly exercise concerned with correctly understanding and estimating the nature of what was once the unparallelled mainstream drama that had blossomed in ancient India—which tradition still lingers in certain forms in rural India. And though the urban theatre appears to have opted out for, or is gravitating towards the lexis-oriented literary *genre* that rules in the Western theatre some elements of that inheritance may have meaning and a sort of recondite relevance for the Indian theatre of the future.

One might, of course, raise a cavil and ask: What purpose is served by comparing the Greek with the Indian tradition? The two being products of totally different theatrical conditions and cultural matrices, would have naturally evolved divergent sets of stage devices, conventions, and values. Obviously, there is no comparison whether in theory or in practice. What's the meaning of such juxtapositions? What light do we get from the exercise? That would certainly be altogether too short-sighted an attitude. For one thing, there is the

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Indo-European link at the basis. And then, after all, comparison implies elements of contrast; and both together bring out clearly distinctive aspects of the object under scrutiny. In effect, our insights into the Indian dramatic mode and *Bharatanatyashastra* are confirmed. The juxtaposition with the Greek serves mainly as a means of such firming up.

Not that there aren't areas of disagreement and doubt. The book's emphatic assertion of the total severing of connection between the ancient Indian drama and the modern Indian theatre which follows the Western lexis-oriented "realistic" model; may prove excessive. Similarly, one may raise the question: Could it be that Sanskrit drama was already moving towards lexical theatre especially in its later phases? Or, may be, conceding that अनुकरण projecting an independent creation "free of the model", *transforms* the objective world, it is possible to ask: What are the norms of that world into which our objective world is transformed? Again, the question can be raised: Couldn't individualized character portrayal go along with "emotional arousal" and रसोसत्ति, and even better it perhaps—promoting it all the more effectively with a deeper response in the theatre? And so on...

As it is, the book no doubt serves to correct many a misconception about ancient drama and is particularly valuable as an authentic reading of *Natyashastra* from the modern critical standpoint. Gupt uses his varied expertise—in itself something difficult to come by—to good purpose. And though his approach is "modern" there is no imposition of anything like "presentism" (to use an ugly term some brash historian seems to have coined!) on the two celebrated classics that are discussed. On the contrary, his work induces speculation as to what kind of *mutations* in the course of the theatre evolutionary process, we may look forward to in India. But such an issue would modulate into an inquiry about the future of Indian culture itself as a whole! □

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LONESOME FIGURES IN PRINTED WORDS

Krishna Rayan

A Python in a Snake Park, by E.V. Ramakrishnan, New Delhi, Rupa, 1994, pp. 52, Rs. 95.

IT is not often that a reviewer is tempted to quote from the blurb on the jacket of the book, but Saleem Peeradina's comment displayed on the back cover contains a sentence that arrests attention, isolating as it does a significant characteristic of Ramakrishnan's poetry: 'His style moves easily and elegantly from a rich, dense texture of images to an ironic, mocking, polemical tone.' Actually, the opacity/transparency polarization (or should we call it the suggestion/statement opposition?) is conspicuous across the whole range of Indian English poetry, with Jayanta Mahapatra (except for his more recent work) at one end of the scale and say, Vikram Seth at the other. In a given poet one or the other mode can be said to be dominant. Can Ramakrishnan, however, be described as Janus-faced, as Peeradina feels, switching at will from either language to the other?

To be sure, many of the poems are more or less enunciative and explicit and aim at accessibility. "Mending Shoes," for instance, begins by calling up a familiar external scene and proceeds to present a roadside cobbler as someone playing God to travel and imposing form and coherence on it. While "Where were you when" mocks, first affectionately, then self-critically, but throughout straightforwardly, the alibi pleaded by the silent majority during a crisis; "Festival Nights in Malabar" warns that generally it is the non-participants that are exposed to its dangers. "Surat" pictures the city in simple reductive terms as a past-present continuum. "The Last Sermon" and "A speech Heard at a Feminist Seminar at Payyannur" both present the public personality stereotype and are satirical and funny in an obvious way. "Porbander, October 1988" (despite its emphatic metaphors), "The

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shadow of a Sudden Bird" (despite the resonance of its concluding image) and "The Archness of Rhetoric" are equally transparent. And "Death in a Housing Colony" and "Father's Last Night" are even more direct and descriptive, although in the latter there is a deep current of feeling underneath the straight reporting and occasional irony.

Then there are some ten other poems in which despite the arcane metaphors, and hiatuses and moments of evasiveness, the "meaning" does come across. "A Postcard Poem", for instance, demonstrates how statement and suggestion can be bedfellows, if somewhat uneasy ones :

> Dear friend, I meant no offence
> when I used the postcard.
> It so happens that I like its feel.
> I like the steel grip of black ink
> on its foggy yellow which reminds me
> of bamboo trees bouncing
> in the monsoon wind.
> Plain like the palm leaf,
> it takes the world as it is,
> unhurried. Here, at last,
> I can renounce the disposable
> world without discarding it,
> as my words, like wet bamboo
> plants bent over the fence,
> slide into necessary silence.

This, however, is not the essential Ramakrishnan. The core of the book comprises some fourteen poems which

> ... speak in a language with no
> script or in riddles like a sphinx

— a dialect that 'is being erased by newsprint'—a primeval speech whose vocabulary consists of images that inhabit our racial memory and haunt our dreams : 'Lonesome figures in printed words.' Fourteen years earlier Ramakrishnan had claimed in his first book of poems, *Being Elsewhere in Myself* .

> ... I deal in words.
> I carry the sword
> of silence
> sheathed in words.

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The first poem in the present collection which has given the book its title is *perhaps* about regression to primitive existence—but to say so is to attempt a paraphrase, and the poem is more than, may be even other than, its paraphrase. It is matched by the last poem in the book, "Lost and Found"—an inscrutable narrative which picks its way through a wilderness of archetypes from the *Ramayana* which have dominated our collective unconcious. And between these two poems are a dozen others of the same kind, and all of them wrestle with the problem which Avvaiyar hints at while stating her mission or message, in the magnificent poem "Avvaiyar in a Haunted Choultry":

Through language, I recover
land from the arced mirror
of the meandering river ...

... Step out of
the mirror into the aphoristic
silence of daylight ...

... Go back to the mud-
walled hut of your mind and be reborn
in language. Look. The land bristles
with signs, the tree with squirrels.
Flushed by words, you stand rooted
to the soil, like a water-diviner waking

Inward to a subterranean beat.

(Incidentally, to set the last five lines beside their original version which appeared in *New Quest* is to become aware how much Ramakrishnan's idiolect has since gained in tautness and strength :

... Look.
The land bristles with
written signs. The tree is

alive with squirrels. Flushed
by words you stand
rooted to the soil,

like a water-diviner
conversing with
subterranean springs.

"Letter to an Afghan Friend," "Groping among Signposts," "Double Lives" (which must be set beside Ted Hughes's "The Thought-Fox"), "Aswathama to Krishna", "To My Son on His Tenth Birthday," "Look-

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ing for a Lost Poem," "To Grandfather-God," "I Leave the Mountains Where I Find Them," and "Rain" all strain alike to catch the rhythm of the current deep underground. "To Grandfather-God", which is short enough to be reproduced in full, is typical of the energy of language, the layered meaning and the disturbing resonance of Ramakrishnan's poetry and shows that reading it can be like crossing a swift stream by leaping from one submerged rock to the next:

> God of tender fronds, sour toddy
> and deep ravines, you walk with
> the ascetic pride of a beast.
> At your approach, we stampede, tethered
> to fear. Through the terminal text
> of your comings and goings, we make
> our brief annual exits, from malice
> to moonlight. For those who live in
> disputed lands, history is reprisal.
> We are ever held in your solitary
> gaze. Ungathered, your footsteps
> rot in the night rain which
> like a net of chanted words,
> laces all our open spaces.

The imagery that crowds Ramakrishnan's verse is the "dishevelled vernacular" (to tear one of his metaphors from the context) of the forces that people the cracks and crannies of the psyche. The tenacity and intensity of his obsessive attention to these make him unique in contemporary Indian English poetry, but to call him unique does not imply that he is necessarily better than the rest nor—as the weird omission of Ramakrishnan from a recent survey of the younger Indian English poets in the British journal *Poetry Review* apparently insinuates—that he is not as good. It is just that he is unlike them—his discourse has something haunting, disquieting about it that is out of step with the postmodernist *haunt monde*.

In 1980 in his first book of poems (p. 22) Ramakrishnan was already lamenting the change within him, lamenting his having passed from a sky "stuffed with lizards" to a sky "full of kites" (paper kites, that is), plaintively rather like Wordsworth in the Immortality Ode. But it has proved a false alarm, a baseless sense of loss. Today, 14 years on, his sky is more dizzying and unsettling than ever:

> For a man from the plains, this lord of
> views is a sudden jump from a fourth
> floor window into the sky's perilous
> interiors. The unsafe heights roam like

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a row of ships carved in the desolate

silver of granite light ... (p. 36)

His colours are such as neither nature nor mixing can produce, the shapes in his verse are like beasts in a fable, and his anxiety and sense of inadequacy are like Sindbad's burden—'I carry my doubts and fears/the way migrating people carry their gods with them.' (p. 10) To Ramakrishnan, cities and towns are no different from the most menacing and remote recesses of the forest's interior. In Jalna in the first book (p. 21)

... every

street ends in
crossroads of some sort ...

Out in their vernacular
abuse I look deaf
like a buffalo
caught in the glass
sheets of rain.

In Surat in the present book

The narrow streets still reek
of panic. You have something of the marshes
and the ravines. The sulphurous air
corrodes. The detours are, as always,
devious. Here, one cannot tell a pilgrim
from a pirate. (p. 15)

Ahmedabad

... in an unfinished
novel, the end always imminent,
but the narrative, like a coroner's
report on a mass suicide, drags on :
its characters are forever caught
in the traffic jam of a wet evening,
laughter sounding like distant gunfire. (p. 4)

Porbander

... from a distance looks
like a pirate ship at anchor.
Light bulges from the broken
porcelain of its sail. (p. 12)

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Bharuch's

> ... maze of lanes,
> overflowing drains,
> haggard and fissured buildings,
> familiar details that fill
> you with fatigue.
> The city no more seemed to believe in itself (P. 14)

And finally, an unnamed (or nameless?) "small town"

> ... is like the past
> of a reformed criminal—distant,
> dishonourable. In its narrow lanes,
> radios neigh, creating the illusion of
> space. Half of its diseases are
> imaginary, the other half incurable. (p. 10)

Here surely is a menagerie of urban agglomerates that grimace and silently growl on the grotesque armorial bearings of today's civilization—emblems of evil that rule Ramakrishnan's vision, a dark, unstated vision. Unstated, because unstatable—like the old woman of Shahapur, Ramakrishnan's poetry, as soon as it becomes eloquent, goes silent and 'lies folded like a mysterious/manuscript in a city museum.' (p. 7)

Ramakrishnan is difficult to label. Is he a postmodernist with a difference, or an unrepentant modernist, or a belated romantic aberration? It is difficult to say. His models? The vitality and strange intensity of imagery in his most characteristic poems are perhaps owed to Sylvia Plath; and the low-key apparently prosaic style, screening an inner turbulence, to the later Robert Lowell. But there clearly are other influences. Malayalam poetry certainly; Marathi and Gujarati poetry read in translation; the national epics; the Deccan Plateau, a forbiddingly austere and reticent text; and the volatility and inscrutability of Gujarat's cities of the plain, contrasted, if only in a flash, with the vertiginous mountainscape of Himachal Pradesh. Here is enough to make a poet complexly and authentically Indian, but there probably are other Indian English poets who are equally so. However, to me, the tautness and vibrancy of his metaphor-laden speech, charting an unquiet world within, give Ramakrishnan a very special status. □

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BOOKS

Collected Poems : A.K. Ramanujan; O.U.P. Delhi, 1995, pp. xxxviii + 289; Rs. 375. Here is the much awaited posthumous collection of A.K. Ramanujan's poems. Book one has pomes from *The Striders*, the second from *Relations* and the third from *Second Sight*. The most fascinating part of the collection for those who are already familiar with these works however is the fourth one called 'The Black Hen' that contains a selection from his unpublished poems, written between 1989 and '93 and polished and re-polished in the typical Ramanujan fashion. Krittika Ramanujan says of these poems: "... The poems are metaphysical and full of a frightening darkness. There is a sense of both a pressure towards this darkness and a simultaneous revulsion from it. The poems begin to seem denser and fuller than anything the poet had done before—" an impression conformed by the poems themselves. The book also has an illuminating introduction by Vinay Dharwadker and an afterword by Molly Daniels-Ramanujan.

River and Bridge : Meena Alexander; Rupa & Co., Delhi, 1995; pp. X + 99. Meena Alexander is easily one of the finest Indian poets writing today in English. This is her fifth book of poems divided into four parts, 'News of the World', 'Mandala', 'Blood Line' and 'San Andreas Fault'. "Her real strength", writes Jayanta Mahapatra, "lies in a sort of lyrical equilibrium she tries to maintain between interior and exterior worlds. In these poems dreams and memory seem to be afloat in 'the unexceptional drift of things' ... a drift that effortlessly becomes the major concern expressed in poem after poem. The poet's compassion for the welfare of her fellow beings is evident in this larger view of the world she chooses to portray ..."

Nomads and Other Moments: Anil Saari Arora; Black Muse Books, Delhi; 1995, pp. xi + 92; Rs. 100. This is the first printed collection of poems by Anil Saari who has been continuously writing since 1963. The poems classified as 'Other Moments', 'Pamphlets of Our Times', 'The No-Nonsense Country', 'Remarks' and 'Nomads' combine a deep concern for human condition with an equally deep fascina-

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tion for the magic of language. Playful and ironic, the poet often takes liberties with language, a sign of real confidence.

Diurnal Rites and Other Poems: J.P. Das; Sahitya Akademi, Delhi; 1994; pp. 91; Rs. 60. This is an English translation by Hrusikesh Panda of J.P. Das's award winning book in Oriya *Anhika*. The poems exhibit a deep thematic unity as they revolve round places, images, experiences and memories of Orissa. The poems, themselves not at all traditional, make creative use of tradition. "It is not possible/to remain neutral/for here/war is inevitable/ and one has no choice/ but to take sides."—These lines from his poem 'Mahabharat' reflect the poet's critical attitude towards the system.

Modernism and Tagore: Abu Sayeed Ayyub; Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, 1995; pp. 222, Rs. 100. This book is an excellent translation by Amitava Ray of Abu Sayeed Ayyub's award-winning book in Bengali *Adhunikata O Rabindranath*. In this major critical attempt, the author evaluates Tagore's genius in the background of modernism as he defines it. The two primary concepts applied in the book are the consciousness of evil and the self-reflectivity of language. The book has an interesting preface, and a piece of polemics as appendix. The critic shows how Tagore moves from romantic effusion and melancholy to the self-possessed tranquillity of divine love, to Western humanism and finally to realisation of 'the gracious aspect of the terrible.'

Narrative, A Seminar: Ed. Amiya Dev; Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, 1994, pp. xii + 342; Rs. 130. This book is a collection of papers presented at the International Seminar on Narrative held by the Sahitya Akademi in 1990. The discussion cuts across a number of language, genres, art forms and historical periods. The participants include Jonathan Culler, Earl Milner, Harbhajan Singh, Ramachandra Gandhi, Sitakant Mahapatra, Qurratulain Hyder, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Bhaskar Chandavarkar, Sisir Kumar Das, Ashok Ranade, T. Morimoto, Karl Maurer, N.C. Jain and Milan V. Dimic among others. The volume in six parts begins with the first-hand testaments of creative writers and moves on to oral and written narratives of the past, modern fictional narrative, painting, music, film and theatre. A major collective contribution to narratology.

A History of Indian Literature, 1911-1956 : Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Akademi, 1995; pp. XVI + 908; Rs. 400. A sequel to the author's *A History of Indian Literature : 1800-1910*, this volume is a self-contained narrative of one of the most creative periods of India's literary history: a period marked by anti-colonial struggle, social reform movements, the rise of the progressive literary movement and even the emergence of modernist trends in some languages. This is no ordinary literary history. It is an aesthetic as well as social history of Indian literature viewed in its entirety as a complex mosaic of languages and traditions which are different from one another yet are interdependent. While giving an incisive account of texts, trends, personalities and movements of the

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period, the work also provokes serious debate as it defends the concept of Indian literature and offers a new model of literary history.

Vedanta : What can it Teach? : B.L. Raina; B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1995, pp. XVIII + 222; Rs. 225. This book has eleven chapters that deal with Vedanta in its historical and cultural context. It begins with a brief review of the pre-vedic Indus Valley people, explains the concept of Brahma in its twin aspects, *saguna* and *nirguna*, examines the Vedic and Upanishadic ideas of the self, takes up the various *yogas* and tries to find out the relevance of Vedanta to the contemporary world that is suffering from excessive greed and hate.

Love in Sanskrit and Tamil Literature: Devapoopaty Nadarajah, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1994; pp. XVIII + 333; Rs. 275. An interesting enquiry into Indian classical literature of both the traditions, the book closely examines the concept of love in the classical texts. It goes into the ideas about heroes and heroines and also of nature in relation to love revealed in these texts composed between 200 B.C. and 500 A.D., thus providing an insight both into classical Indian poetics and into ancient Indian society. It also identifies areas of mutual influence, and similarities between the two traditions.

Language of Love; Ed. Aruna Jethwani: Sterling, Delhi; 1995; pp. x + 94; Rs. 50. This anthology of Indian short stories translated from different languages is intended to present Indian short fiction in its integrative and positive aspect. The stories present issues that in some way threaten India's delicate social fabric. The authors include some well-known names like Amrita Pritam, T. Padmanabhan, Vyankatesh Madgulkar, Rajlaxmi Debee and Popati Hiranandani. The translations are just readable. The lay-out hardly matches the contents. □

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Difference, But with Caution

HOW far can a nation-in-the-making like India afford to embrace the post-modern play of difference in her culture and art? Haven't we already had some lessons as to how religion's call for difference can deteriorate into a form of fascism once its understanding of plurality outsteps liberal tolerance? Haven't we also seen how neo-ethnicity can breed inhumanity, crime and war as with erstwhile Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and even South Africa that is just emerging out of its colonial past into the sunlight of freedom and self-respect? Isn't even the issue of language—another 'difference'—guilty of the murder of the innocent?

It is becoming exceedingly difficult today to separate the question of difference from its disastrous political and civilizational implications. While it may be proper to develop a democratic discourse against large collectives and hegemonic formations in order to provide the long-needed space to minority interests, marginalised sections, subaltern groups, voluntary organisations engaged in issue-specific struggles, tribal languages, unrecognised dialects, literary subcultures, subliterary genres and regional forms of art and life, it will be suicidal for India—for this very democratic practice—to overemphasise these differences so as to jeopardize the other, national, discourse that we have been striving hard to develop in our post-colonial years.

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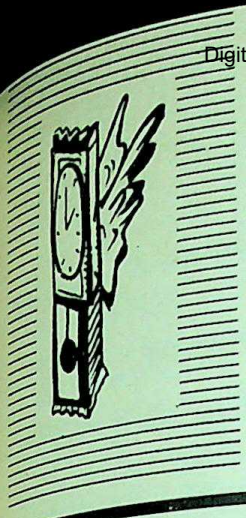
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Our modernist project was engaged in an affirmative act: of developing a healthy federalism in politics, along with a mosaic-like and loose-knit unity of our cultures that without losing sight of our diversity and difference also projected the possibility of a new, secular, national culture. It seems doubtful and even dangerous for us to abandon the project altogether and go after the western models of post-Modernism which, while it may suit monoreligious and monocultural formations, may have negative implications for a nation that is already multi-cultural and multi-religious, a nation whose very voice is a conglomeration of voices, and whose very civilisation has never been a monolith. What we mean is that enough attention has always been paid to the question of difference even within our discourses of unity pioneered by leaders, writers and historians of art and culture. In other words, our modernist project, unlike in the West, also contained in it the post-Modernist recognition of difference; only its wisdom would not permit this play of differnce to explode the very concept of the nation which would mean fragmentation, civil war and bloodshed of the kind we now see in some parts of Europe (while in other parts we also see a tendency towards unity). Its spokesmen would not capitulate a nation, that, with all its shortcomings, was still predicated on a democratic polity and modern secular values. They saw unity not as a silencing of diversity, but as a continuous and evolving dialogue and creative interaction among our different languages, cultures and sections of people. They never believed in the authority of a sacred, infallible central voice that would bulldoze all unevenness and crush all difference.

Our present champions of the post-Modernist idea of difference therefore are morally bound to define difference against all forms of revivalistic cultural nationalism as also against the ideology of political separatism, against a mere atavistic retrieval of an ethnic past as also the pressures of the culture-market that is ready to absorb and trivialize everything native, turning it into another cultural commodity that would adorn the drawing rooms of our erstwhile colonizers and present intruders with their orientalist fantasies. We should be careful not to permit our celebration of plurality to overthrow our secular and egalitarian national narrative. What is at stake is our sense of sovereignty and our imaginary collectivity so essential to fight the dark powers that are threatening our identity and our independent existence as a nation at economic, social and cultural levels. □

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Pranjivan Mehta

TO MY SON M

Sonny baby M.
you do have dreams still?
and you do dream of fairies too?
if so
you are not mature yet, my son
how do i explain to you
the letter P, P for poetry
of other letters in the alphabet
let us not mind more
one may concoct them at leisure
but the P for poetry
is not easy to grasp
more so, you do have the habit
of muttering while in sleep
the reign of your verbal world
has not reached the awakening yet, my dear.
in this land the silence is held high in esteem
and the spoken world hangs here as a facile act
but the split between the two worlds
is pretty hard to bridge, do you get me, my child?
harness those horses flying about in the air
and tie them to the stables in the castle
of your watery constructs.
shed off the leaves from those fruitless trees
grown out of the monster's mouth
gather together the heaviness on your eyelids
and packup the outland yonder the seven seas
only then
perhaps you may be able vaguely to discern
the P of poetry
thereafter
we may proceed to have a dialogue
my darling my M.

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A STORY TELLING

Now that the eventide is here, a time for story-telling
light up a story-lamp, Grandpa
A story of the squint-eyed prince of the blind king and queen!
bring him into arena, Grandpa
A haunted palace the prince lived in, sunrays wove webs around
him didn't you tell so, Grandpa
A princess once the prince saw and questioned the self
why the shadows be black, isn't it so, Grandpa
A question-mask the prince donning on him,
wouldn't it bring the story to a standstill, Grandpa
A wrecked ship and the sand emptying into the vessel
how far is he destined to go Grandpa?
A tiny sea and oars all awry, what would the fate bring to him
could you tell me Grandpa?
A weapon needed to pierce the heart of his questions
get him a bow and arrows, Grandpa
A dense forest with interior dark, the prince at the well of
voluminous black, what happened to him Grandpa?
A peep down at the water and a gaze at his self and the shadow
playing the game of hide and seek, Grandpa
A wonder will work if only the prince could recognize a human
flash out a little light for him, Grandpa
A story of the squint-eyed prince of the blind king and queen
bring him into the arena, Grandpa
Now that the eventide is here, a time for story-telling
light up a story-lamp, Grandpa

HAVE A LOOK

Cast aside the debris
and have a look
look
at the world buried beneath
over a thousand years old.

Dig deep into the debris
and have a look
look
at the world peering from beneath
over its imminent birth.

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Clear away the debris
and have a look
look
at the hollow space
between the two worlds
See if you can make yourself at home in it.

Have a look
look at it
casting aside the debris. □

Translated from Gujarati by Karamshi Pir

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Dileep Jhaveri

DAYS HAVE COME

Peacock on mango bough
the days to play with fingers of beloved
cuckoos sing
the days to smile linking eye to eye

craw cawing at high noon
the days to await some one
flames on tulip branches
the days hot from the sighs of estranged lovers

for me
the days of singing a hundred songs

TO HAMLET

donning floral shroud
precociously in autumn land
awakes spring
in the mist no shadow nor any light
achromatic hazy uncertain dream

water dew
sound exhalation
pain perhaps

Unmoving boat in the river of perhaps
come fear not this spring
the swan lost in flight

donning floral sheet
in autumn cage
alights

mist
last Hamlet

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STRAIGHT AND SIMPLE TALES

1

For sale

a house
with furniture and fittings
westward windows
original life-sized mirrors
electricity water air flowerpots plants birds
and on the walls
daguerreotypes of elders holding laughing children

Anyone
interested
May come
even without prior appointment
at the following address

2

When everything has collapsed
only then
meaning
again comes to dwell
in simple things

Only after falling down the dizzy stairs
vibrating mirrors
would realize
that
a door is meant for exit too

After the chaos of noise and silence
would appear a lonely boat
in the shadow of a face
bending over
a handful of water of the first word

After everything is submerged
in the flood
would fly out
from a breath barely saved
the first little bird. □

Translated from Gujarati by the Poet

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Jaydev Shukla

RUINS

On a lonely hill
Wearing centuries-old tattered sky
Ruins cough.
Striking repeatedly
Dry open eyes of ruins
Golden patina of air crumbles.
On the plains stands
A solitary tree on the bank
Painting a boat
Over the sands of dry river.
To douse
The flaming darkness within the boat
Dive crashingly
The ruins.

FISHERWOMAN

Stepping
In the mud of the shore
Mast-like the fisherwoman,
Painting mascara of sea,
Dangling the sun on her bosom,
Towards the boat
Takes a step
Into the water,
The sea
Tears
Trrruk ...

TWANG FROM THE BOW

Two sparrows flutter
Golden

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From the wings flies
Silver spray.
Wraps around mountains.
Condenses.
Blueblack peaks
Undulate.
The seventh horse rushes
Through and through.
River, taut
Arrow-like
From the bow
Twaaang . . . . . □

Translated from Gujarati by Dileep Jhaveri

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Kamal Vora

CROW-1

a crow
on the verge of stepping out of the sea
at the moment
tidal wave in red rose high in the air
and the sky regaled in yellow
the sun
totally eclipsed by the crow
only hues of blue shimmered
the tip of the crow's beak
a dot
a navel epicentre

and when the crow croaked
cra ... cra ...
the tidal wave had collapsed
and the wings had opened up
the red sun shot up
or the cornea made a slight shift
and the rainbow arched across the sky
the crow was in flight ...

thereafter
yellow sea-waters bobbed up, higher up
the sky heaved expanding
the sun was in the glide
the crow was in flight ...

and
there was spaceful of red yellow and blue
the space was traversed
by a sharp black line

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CROW-2

far in the distance
a blue line
of waves

exactly midway
a crow
the sky of molten gold
casts shadows on its feathers

if
the crow flies away
the sea rushes over me
roaring
at a thunderous speed
if the crow remains in repose
the sea-water in slow motions
transfigures
into dark boulders solid in blacks

daggered in the chest
by a long pointed beak
i cross
through and through the crow
at the far end
i face
incalculable crows in glaring gold
the beaks reverberating
echoes of the roaring sea
blue suns in the distance
behind them the black skies
if
i turn away my back
the crows
whirl and encircle me
if
i remain standstill
the crows
change into smog of misty blues

within me something water-like resplends
i find myself of blue stone
in front of me lies
a golden mist

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at far distance flies
a black crow

CROW-3

there
a
plain
countless crows on the plain
could be stones
if they flew then certainly crows

white
sky
countless stones in the sky
could be crows
if they fall then certainly stones

a
crow
countless skies in the crow
could be plains
if they heave then certainly skies

a
stone
countless plains in the stones
could be skies

if plains then certainly stones
if skies then certainly crows

Translated from Gujarati by Karamshi Pir

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Rajendra Shah

WHAT SHOULD I DO

What should I do with the fallen leaf?
The branch also does not get the shade.
No speck of green or moisture,
No path leads from here,
The sky was so full with the sweet cooing,
I do not observe fluttering of even one feather,
It was a meeting place of sweetness,
A day gone by does not return.
The onion of dreams and memories
Is non-existent here
Even the tickling of anklets does not occur.

AT MIDNIGHT

1

Midnight sound of the clock-tower
Serene.
Sleepy eyes
Open.
Darkness
Clear sky.
Stars
Ascetic silence
Glistening.
Towards horizon leaps a running deer
Chased by the tiger.
The entire universe,
Dumbfounded.
I turn sides, and
See the lingering seasonal splendour
In my eyes.

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AFTERNOON

2

Sunshine
Ruling over all the ten directions
Shade
Hiding under its own feet.
Tranquil bowery,
Birds,
Leaves,
Chattering.
Fish
Leaping out of water
Towards the sky
Disappearing again in water.

AT THE END OF THE DAY

3

The sun setting,
Horizons of the sky
Lustre of the gathered clouds
Bluish-pink.
Motionless waters of the lake.
Thus is the beauty of the evening.
Partridge moving noiselessly
Dips its beak.
The circular ripple
Stops at the banks
Of my eyes.
The sky
Dark blue.

IN SOLITUDE

4

The chirping birds
Come and play in the grove here
In the solitary abode.
It is very pleasing.
At the early dawn

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Divine flowers
Drop from celestial trees.
I wear
Their shining memories
In this solitary abode
The treasured time of the past.

Translated from Gujarati by Sushama Merh



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Chinu Modi

BAHUK

NAL

Shall I ask
the setting sun?
Shall I ask
the nest-bound bird?
No,
I shall ask the imprisoned

buzzing sound :
Do you know where will be
my resting place?

But,
Oh! mute question of mine,
you are motionless like the four directions,
obstinate like a head-strong woman,
you are like the king-elephant
devoid of its tusk.

The lance flung
by an assailant
hastening towards me
unfaltering
-even that lance cannot
terrify me

But, you?
But you reduce me
to a blade of grass
tossed by the rain water
surging forth from the hills.

Uprooting me,
displacing me,

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you have brought me
face to face with
the terror
of this vast earth.

Yet
you are intractable
like the thorn
that has pierced
deep down inside the flesh

Oh, mute question!
unexpressed that you are,
you drill into my body,
you unnerve me.

You afflict me
with the ever present
pain of a festering wound.

Now,
I shall ask
the ancient long-lived
banyan tree
flourishing
at the other end of the city :
Oh, king of trees,
is one's abode too subject
to the vagaries of time?

As a child,
while passing by
in a chariot
with my blessed father
I have seen you
standing at this very spot.

Today in my
advancing age I see you
still standing here.

You have stayed
beyond time
always here,
Oh, king of trees,

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then,
why am I not there
where I was yesterday?

Why is it that
I am cast, against my will,
like a shell on the parched sea-shore?

Did the ocean
wish it that way?
Or was I flung
on the sea-shore
by the waves at the wind's command?

Or is it
because I have not been
as water
in the sea?
Is it for this reason
that I have been cast out?

I,
I that am like
a flower plucked
off its branch
Where shall I now go?

Even if I am
returned to the branch
I shall remain
only a chance visitor.

Oh, Nishadh city,
as I set out
on your highways
for the first time without a chariot
it was
not only my feet
that felt unfamiliar

But the sound of my every
foot-step
every imprint of my foot
pressed in the mud
on the highway's chest

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seemed to fling
defiance at me
like alien windows
empty of crowds

Helpless like the lifeless
dexter arm of a life-size
marble statue
erected in an alien city

dull-witted
like the stretched string
of a stone bow

sterile

disoriented
like an arrow in the painted
quiver afflicted
with bluntness
I stood
as if dead.

Then
the sun
with its thousand rays
was burning me.
But, oh, Nishadh city,
Where had you the strength
to receive even my shadow?

Shipless in the wild sea,
unarmed in the battle-field,
a body, yes; but without a shadow

Though I did set out
with the palm of a frightened
worn-out Vaidarbhi
resting bird-like
on my unyoked shoulder,

Yet
oh, Nishadh city
after such intimacy
over so long a time
even if I go

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divorcing you
how far can I go?

Oh city,
I am of the city:

How can I
part from you?

2
BRIHADASHIVA

'Let's go where forbidden is every
ray of the sun'

The words
echo
incessantly

Fierce wild animals
tormented with guile
flash like lightning, roar

At the same pace
forcefully the words
echo :
'Where forbidden is every ray of the sun'

★

Oh Vaidarbhi!
you who fended off
even the inevitable darkness
of the night
from the palace

with a string of lamps
no wonder
when the pearl clad in shell
moves from the deep sea
to the sea-coast
its parting with water
is much less painful
than that of fish.

Oh! lady
of the afflicted mind,

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invented worlds are
endlessly idyllic—
every imagined moment
is exciting—

But
the invincible horse
of Ashwa-medh,
back from its victorious
round may well be asked :
Can you tell
the familiar darkness
of the city stable
from that darkness where
every sun-ray is forbidden

The dark verdant blackness
of the forest is not peaceable
like the darkness
of the city—
Even if the opaque
thick curtain of the city's
darkness were to veil—
who would it veil?
palaces?
streets?
men?
who?

More often than not
in the forest
that coiled darkness
is a serpent,
not a rope.
Fed on desolate
darkness, hardened
in the constant company
of beasts
the scheming darkness
of the forest
can fly like a bird
can leap like a lion
can like a poison-tree
benumb and annihilate you

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the very instant
you draw near

Sometimes
this drunken darkness
with no mahout around
can stretch its trunk,
trample underfoot
and disfigure anything
with its brutal passion alone.

The darkness of the forest
has never known
any string of lights
and cannot distinguish
form from formlessness

Its brutal passion alone
disfigures anything.

So,
beware
of the vari-coloured
darkness of the forest.
Beware, anyway,
of any darkness
which is undecipherable.

This darkness
penetrable only by the clairvoyant
sages
gives access to the forest
only to him
who yields
to his own truth.

Therefore,
oh, daughter of Vidarbh
beware of your speech
which is like a boulder
hurtling down
dislodged from the top of the mountain
blowing everything to smithereens

★

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But,
vain is all this, vain
The tusks
of the mahoutless, mad elephant
which glinted from afar
are closing in
now—

★

Eye lashes,
quickly draw your curtains
do not let these
scenes freeze
on the eye's screen

Now
the beautiful
turns ugly.

Graceless scenes—
Please do not nest in my eyes.

3
NAL

The birds have flown away snatching my cloth,
Naked, naked am I.
Recede, oh river waters
Recede to the mountain-top
Oh! mountain-like sacred tree,
Sink to your roots

Go back, on! water-bearing clouds,
To the sky, go back.
I am naked
again as at the time
of birth
I am defenceless
as at no time before.
Why do I remember
my compassionate mother
when I am naked as
at the time of my birth?

Beloved, will you drape me like my mother?

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Will you teach me the language that tames?
Can you restore dead fish to water
Alive once again to swim for ever?

Why this all over again, again and again, in the same sequence?
With all my might I should shatter
these frightful bonds
So that the pictures
as yet undrawn
yet to be drawn,
will surface on the canvas of time

Moaning like a female lapwing,
alarmed like a deer pursued
by a piercing arrow,
she stands near the Ashoka tree,
unable to shed her sorrow
abashed
in the tatter covering her
praying
to the patriarchal mountains
to look around with their lofty gaze;
babbling to a group of saints,
ablaze in the flames of separation;
This is the daughter of Bhimak,
so close to my heart.

Can I stand the sight of her
lost in the desolate forest
confused and frightened?
How can the beautiful garment be pierced?

I am defenceless
as at no time before.
And this ...
This city of Nishadh
So tender to her children,
in whose hands I frolicked as a child,
who welcomed me as a king in my youth,
She is benumbed like a woman
receiving the dead bodies
of her husband and son
at the end of the day's battle.
All that was familiar

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in the garb of directions
has turned inscrutable.

★

These bonds are like the strong
perfume of strange forest
flowers trying to become familiar
—hard of hearing and blind to boot

★

These bonds are like the trees
set on fire by their nearness to
a burning tree
—of little faith and blind.

Thus,
before this green forest
turns to ashes
under the curse
of my proximity
let me flee
with clenched fists
and clipped lips
let me flee somewhere.

★

Before I scorch this blossoming city
And this tender creeper with my
Burning skin, let me renounce them all
Let me accept the colossal cursed stillness
Of solitude, though it stings.

Be fatal—NAL WILL BE ANNULLED. □

Translated from Gujarati by E.V. Ramakrishnan

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IN MEMORIAM

Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena
(1927-1983)

HUNGER

Whenever
Someone gets up
To fight against hunger
Looks beautiful

Swooping hawk,
Snake with risen hood,
Goat Balancing itself on its two feet,
Nibbling at tiny leaves amidst thorns,
Leopard furtively walking behind bushes,
Parrot, upside down on a branch,
Nibbling at fruits
Or in their place had it been a man.

Whenever someone
Stands up to fight against hunger
Looks beautiful.

DUST

You are dust
Stamped under feet
Rise with the restless wind
Turn into a storm
And fall into the eyes of those
Who tread upon you.
There is no place that
You cannot reach.
There is no one who can stop you.

You are dust
Trodden under feet
Blend with the dust.

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OFTEN SOME SORROW

Often a smell
Passes by me
Often a river
Gets filled before me
Often a boat
Strikes against the shore
Often a trodden path
Beckons me from afar.
Wherever I am
I sit down,
Often a statue
Gets carved from the dust.

Often I find
The moon in my pocket
The squirrel sitting on a tree
Nibbles at the sun.
Often the world
Contracts into a pea,
It settles on a palm.
Wherever I am
I get up from there.
Often the night comes
Crawling like an ant.

Often a laughter
Blows like a cold wind.
Often a glance covers me like a hat.
Often some thing
Stands like a mountain.
Often a silence
Dons me with my clothes
Wherever I am
I move from there.
Often a sorrow
Turns into a journey.

"IN THIS DEAD CITY"

In this dead city
I walk all day and night

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And at the end I reach there
From where I started.

On all sides
Either I find the doors closed
Or if open, open like dead eyelids
Every journey comes to an end
Before it begins.
Whatever I touch, totters
And falls upon me.
Search for every support
Leaves me smaller and weaker.

I come across countless looks
But in no eye I find
The reflection of my image,
After climbing down the step
Of every relationship
I find myself more desolate
In this dead city.
Here the high rise buildings
Are not for shelter, but for self fulfilment;
Carrying them on my back I crawl;
And Time like a giant wheel hurtling past me
Tramples upon me
And leaves me on a slope,
And goes forward.
I do not know
Whether I am alive or dead.

I laugh and I sing
I cry and I shriek
I love and I abuse
Yet in every situation
I remain as I was
As if I am amidst the dead
As if I am lifting them and keeping them
Hugging them and fighting them
Tying them together
And dumping them behind I go for ward
In this dead city.

The most significant facts
are thrown uncared for in the garbage-bins

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The bells of prayer houses
Appear like wild animals smelling stench
And the name of God
Becomes a mask on the face of
Every hypocrite.
Stupidity in the name of Faith
Cowardice in the name of conscience
Pettiness in the name of success
Is stamped on every face.
And one corpse is trying to cast
Another corpse in the same mould,
In this dead city.

Water of every well is rotten
Every pond is full of dead fish
I throw big stones just to see
If they make any ripples
Death—every moment a death
Stands facing me
From ambition to expression
From beginning to achievement
At every step there is death,
Which I die—
Yet I keep going
In this dead city.

The words I weave
Are dead.
The words I hear
Are dead.
The relations I live
Are dead.
Every second a mirror cracks,
An image dies,
It be of God's or
Of man's
It may be of the city tower
Or of an Academy,
The meaning of knowledge here
Is knowledge of death
Every thing else is ignorance
In this dead city.

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A big flag flies
In the name of Man here
A dead page from dead history,
Flies, flutters and sings,
Every time I stumble and fall against it
On the road
A whiff of stench and repulsion
Makes me get up again.
With all my strength
I try to push back the unknown
Then sweating and bleeding
I fall down,
A leaf of some strange tree stirs
The bees hum
And once again I do not know why,
I get up
And start walking
In this dead city.

Where walking is death,
Not-walking is death,
Faith is death
Doubt is death
Surrender is death
Rebellion is death
Love is death
Hatred is death
Living is death
Not-living is death
In this dead city
In the end once again
I reach from where I started.

NOW I WILL NOT LET THE SUN SET

Now I will not let the sun set

See I have widened my shoulders
Made the fists tighter
And I have learnt to stand with fixed heels on steep slopes

Do not fear
I am going towards the horizon
As the sun will start trumbling from the hills
I will fix my shoulders

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And you will see it stop there
I will not let the sun set

I have heard
You are on that chariot
I want to bring you down
You who are the image of freedom
You who are the image of courage
You who are the joy of the earth
You who are the eternal love
You who are the blood that flows in my veins
You who are the extension of my consciousness
I want to bring you down from that chariot

The horses of the chariot
May spit fire
But now the wheels will not budge
I have widened my shoulders

Who can stop you?
I have extended the earth
I will dress you with the golden cobs of corn
I have uncovered my chest
I will sing amorous songs for you
I have opened my eyes wider
In my eyes I will fly you like my dreams

Where can the sun go?
It will have to live here
Here—in our breaths
    in our veins
    in our vows
    in our awakened nights

Do not be depressed
Now I will not let the sun set

The evenings will not be like nails of shoes
Which may prick you
I have extended my journey
I have widened my shoulders.

WAITING

Waiting

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Is an enemy
Do not trust Him.

He hides in ambush
In unknown, unseen bushes and mountains
And we fix our ears
Only on the murmur of leaves

Waiting
Is an enemy
Never trust Him

He is like a soldier
Who hides in darkness
And keeps a watch on us
Who stand in light—
In search of an opportunity
And we keep on throwing torch light into the dark

Waiting
Is an enemy
Never trust Him

He turns us into a river
And like a fish unseen swims past us
And we keep looking for Him
With countless hands of each wave

Waiting
Is an enemy
Never trust him.

Keep clear of Him
Whatever you want, get it instantly
Whatever you want to do, do it, without waiting.

Translated from Hindi by Chandra Prabha Pandey

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HARINDRA DAVE

(1930-1995)

With Humility, With Gratitude

MY only dilemma is from where to start. As Cardinal Heenan said, 'any story about the self should start with the birth' and it is a paradox that we do not remember that event. I have been trying to recollect when my creativity was born. I can say when my first poem was published; but it is difficult to trace the moment when creativity was conceived within. Naturally, when one does not remember the birth, one may be inclined to start with the end. I am confident, my creativity will not desert me till the last breath of my life. But, I am not aware under what circumstances the end will come; so I am compelled to start somewhere between these two extremes.

Right from my childhood I have been shy and lonely. I wanted to communicate; I was eager to share with someone. I wanted to converse. Very soon, I found myself doing all that with somebody: that somebody was none else but myself. I was not aware of what I was doing. I was just humming and scribbling. Thus, before I knew, what is called writing, I started experiments in expressing myself.

I remember showing some of my earlier poems to my father. He died when I was eleven. He left for me a small but select library: it included a novel by Thomas Hardy, a book by J. Krishnamoorthy, written and published in the mid-twenties—before he left the order; a collection of poems by Kalapi, a romantic Gujarati poet who died at the age of twenty-six; it also contained Geeta with Swami Vidyanand's commentary and some rare special issue of 'Kalyan'—a Hindi religious journal published from Geeta Press, Gorakhpur. These are some specific influences to which I was subjected at a time when I started feeling that I too will one day become a writer. Underlining all my humility and underlaying all the connotations of the word, I can say, I have become a writer. That is why I am here today.

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I am expected to talk about my creative process this evening. Creativity springs from solitude and I am speaking about it in public. This itself is a contradiction we all have to bear in mind. In this dialogue, I can give explanations; but cannot venture to describe experiences. Explanations are afterthoughts. It is the process when logic takes over from instinct. Logic has no place in the arena of experience. The mystery of a poem is unknown to the poem itself. How is the poet going to know about it?

Basically, I am a very private person. By private, I do not mean secretive, but one who would like to be left alone. The design of the destiny is such that I have been pitched in the newspaper world which demands extrovert nature. I started my career as a film journalist and interviewed Mehboobkhan, Dilip Kumar, Kamini Kaushal, Vijay Bhatt and Ashok Kumar. The private person within me has been observing my encounters with public figures right from those years. As a journalist, I covered the stormy AICC meeting in Bombay in 1956 and saw Nehru, Maulana Azad and V.K. Krishna Menon from close quarters. To meet politicians and public figures has been a part of my job. I have spent precious evenings with Jayprakash Narayan at Ramnathjee's Cuff Parade Guest House. Have met Jarnailsingh Bhindranwale when things were too hot at the Golden Temple; have rubbed shoulders with Mikhail Gorbachev at Kremlin in 1987; have been face to face with Chancellor Kohl of West Germany and last year I had an opportunity to meet Carlovy Gross in Budapest, just a fortnight after he took over from Janos Kadar. While, I had to be extrovert, as a part of my job, my attempts have always been to keep my solitude intact. I have learned to be lonely in a crowd. Thus journalism has helped me in strengthening my anchorage in the field of experience. While dealing with words and still more words, I may canalize the tumultuous lava within me. The delight that I experience in capturing a word, a phrase, a line or just a rhythm is more than all the glamour that the world can offer.

I do not remember having met Sage Durwasa in this birth, but most of my yesteryears are consigned to oblivion. So, I requested Suresh who knows me perhaps more than myself to help me in searching out milestones down my memory lane.

I was brought up in a small town of Bhavnagar, but the town is known for its cultural traditions. I benefited from them. I have heard Meghani and Dula Kag's bold and melodious manifestations of folk rhythms. I was enamoured with *Bhavai* a form of *loknatya*. Thus I

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adapted rhythm from the tradition, but I have taken experience from my own life. I am proud that my roots are in tradition and my expression springs from an impossible existence dominated by forces utterly beyond my control.

I started writing very early. My poems were accepted by Umashankar, Vijayrai Vaidya, Sundaram—the names that count in Gujarati literature. But while still in the mid-teens—on the way from sixteen to seventeen, I met one critic—Bhrugurai Anjaria. He read my poems and bluntly, and very rightly told me; "If you continue to write like this you will end up in mediocrity. Poem should come from your own being, your own experience." Experience is not a thing one seeks without. It was within—in my loneliness, in my encounters with other egos, in my joys and sorrows, in a moment which I thought was blissful, in events when I thought I passed through genuine inferno. All these were there. But in my frantic efforts to be a writer, I disregarded my colossal depository of elements, matters amassed within, and tried to search for them outside.

Then a decision came. I decided that I want to earn while still studying. It was not possible in Bhavnagar. In those days only Bombay had morning colleges. Here, in this vast city, I knew what it really was to be lonely. I was a total stranger confronted with the enormity of this interminable city; while searching for a job enough to provide a loaf to feed the aching stomach, I came to know what hunger was. I had known poverty but hunger is not synonymous with it. There were days and months when I had forgotten that I wanted to be a writer. One early morning, a jobless me was sitting on Marine Drive; in 1950 it was a different Marine Drive; rows of pale lights were seen on Walkeshwar on one side and newly built houses of Marine Drive on another. In between, there was the vast sea. It seemed that the total peace of the city was buried under the sea and was covered with the pall of the sky with silver laces on both sides. I put down this experience in the form of a Sonnet. I can say, the creative me was born on this day.

Once Suresh asked me: "You have passed through terrible times. Why don't your poems reflect this bitterness?"

I had replied then, and Suresh only reminded me of my reply three decades back: "I do not depict the way world treats me. I would like to depict the way how the world should treat me." "Me" here does not denote this individual, but connotes the human being at large.

This human being—man or woman—does not go forward through life along 'a straight, horizontal path.' He or She does not

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stop at stations shown on any indicator. The total man is beyond comprehension. A writer, however great he may be, deals with a fragment of life. I have tried to capture this fragment, this emotion in my novels and poems.

My themes are Love, God and Death. I do not know at what point they merge into one another.

Love, for me, is not just a feeling. It is not even a state of mind. It is certainly not reverie or fantasy. It is real. It hurts, it soothes. Love does not exclude the physical; only, it does not stop at that. It has no pretentions of platonism. Even my love with the divine is human; if this is a weakness, it is also a strength.

My love-lyrics have a different range. Krishna is an oft repeated allegorical figure in my poems and also in a novel. Once I had said that Krishna is my surreal experience. It is a symbol from the myth; but I have recontrived Him by my imagination. My love for Krishna is my love for man. I have a distinct feeling that I have met Krishna on the way.

Mane Maarge malya'ta Shyam kon maanshe?
Ek meetman kalya'ta Shyam kon maanshe?

(Krishna met me on the way; who will believe it? Who will believe that I recognised him at a glance?)

In the above rhymes, lyric is blended with the spirit of the Ghazal. Ghazal comes to me as naturally as a lyric. In Bhavnagar, where I grew up, this form was rooted in surroundings. I was lucky to be very near to poet Shahbaaz, a scholar of Persian literature. He initiated many of us into the Sufi traditions of Hafiz, Rumi and Sadi. He also explained Iqabal's ghazals with their spiritual context. This helped me in understanding ghazals in all its dimensions. Thus, tradition for me remained as 'a beauty to be preserved, rather than fetters to bind.' In early fifties, say in 1952 and 1953, I was writing verses like this

Virah ni raatnun varnan jara raho to kakun,
Kahun, je hoy chee aalam,, tame na hoto, kahun,

or

Ane lidhun jyan chaar dinni chadaninu naam,
Mujane fari smaranman chadyun jindginu naam.

I can humbly say, that these ghazals written in early fifties were forerunners to the new trends which were to appear in the early sixties.

Love, death and God have been my undeviating concerns to which I have turned at every stage of my creativity. But their conno-

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tations kept on changing as I evolved. As observed by my favourite writer Henry Miller, "writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery. The writer takes the path, in order eventually to become that path himself."

In my early poems, love is a romantic supposition. The entranced state of mind of a young man in narcissist love may give way to lines which mean :

"O my Beloved, best amongst the forests is Nandanvan; best amongst the minds is yours. Best amongst the moments is one of your meetings, which I recollect ever-after."

Death in this stage also approaches not as a fearsome fate, but a friend.

In Krishna, I have blended both love and death. In my novel *Madhav Kyanya Nathi,* as well as in the lyric the absence of the Lord or His death itself is an image of life. I may take a poem of this period.

The title is 'Ghar' (Home).
Home is the abode where we go at the end of the day.
It is also the home where we turn at the end of life.

Thus this poem concerns with the state of death. But it deals with beaming life. The road, the time, houses on both the sides, wind enveloping me in its embrace, doves engaged in talk of love, smelling sticks of eastern rays, child walking on the road hand-in-hand with its mother; all these are symbols of life. It does not lead to death, but more meaningful life after this life.

Suresh at that time was staying at 10th Road, Khar. One early morning, when I was walking down my way to his residence the first few lines of the poem took shape.

One point about my creative process.

I do not rewrite a poem or even a piece of prose. When a line comes to my mind I first reject it. In my mind only I write and rewrite. What I pen is the final version arrived at after many combats with expression. Thus, even though, I do not efface and rewrite on paper, I pass through that excercise in my mental span before jotting down even a line.

Let me turn to the next stage.

I had a near-death experience in January, 1973. Doctors had declared me dead; I defied their verdict and lived. For me death is not be-all and end-all. Actually, when I want to talk about life, I start with death.

I had been to the Himalayas in April 1972. I stayed almost alone for a few days in voluntary solitude at Shankaracharya Nagar, Hrishikesh. One dark night when the dawn was still away, I crossed

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the pitch dark jungle to reach the banks of Ganga. I wanted to catch the first boat to reach the opposite shore to catch a bus for Rudrapprayag. Suddenly these lines came to me: *Nirante malvu chhe/Ekant male to aa kshane jal/pan/kshan etle kat to samay?*

These lines were addressed to death. I completed the poem after a month or so.

My third phase is what I call realization. Again, I am not talking about spiritual dimension. I do not know what has happened and when. But something changed my being. Was it an August evening or a September day? Something positive happened and I felt enriched by showering Bliss. Was it Divine Manifestation? or Fulfilment? or Love? I cannot describe it. I only know that it happened. Until now I have been observing Krishna in my context. For the first time I started realising Krishna in His context.

Bhitar samaranganaman oobho Arjun
Ene kem kari Geeta sambhalavun!

(In the battlefield within me, there is an Arjun; how am I going to narrate to him Geeta?)

My longer poems will perhaps survive along with my few lyrics.

Looking at motor cars
gliding ahead and back
with billowing floodlights
Green trees ask each other
where all these go
horizontally back and ahead

We go down into roots,
we blossom up in the sky,
sure, are we not making a mistake?

Before I switch over to my novels, I am reminded of one incident. My first novel *Aganpankhi* was a popular romance. My friend and my colleague at Bhavan, Ghanshyam Desai very frankly told me: "This novel will be popular; it will be read. But it will never make you a novelist." I took the hint and pursued the form more seriously.

It is possible for me, not to talk about my novels. It is impossible to talk about them in such a short span. I would have preferred to talk about 'Madhav' ... but as I have already referred to the use of the Krishna myth in my writings, I may as well choose another novel. I am tempted to select *Vasiyat*, which I think is a significant contemporary novel which will be appreciated more as time passes. But to dwell on almost five hundred pages of this novel is not possible.

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Instead, I will talk about a short novel *Anagat*. It is available in both Marathi and Hindi, shortly, it will be published in English also.

In the midsixties, I had visited a holiday resort. My friend Late Minoo Desai, Editor of *Bombay Samachar*, arranged my stay at this resort. The place was simply fantastic. The beach there is just legendary. The place I stayed was full of vibrations of loneliness. It was managed by a kind lady. Facts end at this point. The rest that emerged in the novel is fiction. Even this locale is blended in the novel with another beautiful place Mahuva near Bhavnagar.

I was lured by the surroundings. The village was dying—disintegrating. I wanted to depict death. The death of love was symbolized by the affair between the lady managing the resort (of the novel) and the protagonist.

A couple of years back, Suresh Dalal, Jagdish Doshi, Shivji Ashar and myself had gone to Prantij—a township of north Gujarat. One night our host took us to a play staged by a touring theatre company. The atmosphere was simply bewitching. This gave me one important character of the novel. My friend Homi Dastur helped me understand the locale.

Jagdish had talked to me about a child with the fatal disease called 'Marble Bones'. This child also entered the book. My own idea of death merged into the total concept of this short novel. I would not have finished it, had it not been selected for serialisation in three parts in *Navneet*. I completed it in three sittings each at the interval of one month.

The facts, which inspired me to write this piece of fiction were transformed. Metamorphosis was complete. Still, when Minoo Desai told me that he had been at the same resort and the kind lady there (who has nothing to do with a similar character in the novel) was reading my book, I almost was shivering. It is almost two and half decades, but I have not ventured to revisit the place.

I have written several one-act plays and one full length play. The latter was written in 1967 when preparations of Gandhi Centenary were in full swing. I was attracted by *Saint Joan* by Bernard Shaw and particularly the last scene when those who were keen in cannonising Saint Joan of Arc were not prepared to accept her in flesh and blood. This idea had enraptured me. Jean Anouile's Joan of Arc, featuring in his play *Lark* also fascinated me.

Almost around that period I came across the pamphlet by Chester Bowls: "If Marx could return ..." This title gave me idea. What may happen, if Gandhi could return? From this *Yuge Yuge*, which was staged with the title *Sandhyakale Prabhatferi* was written. It is a political

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satire on pseudo-Gandhians. Therein I ridiculed a Gandhian who wanted the Government lottery named after Gandhi. I was stunned, when after a few years lottery run by Governments became a reality.

When Oedipus was stopped at the gates of Thebes and confronted by the riddle of Sphinx he said only one word: "Man" and the demon killed herself. The same word can be the reply to riddles raised by more terrible demons today. It requires courage to utter this word "Man." As a creative artist my endeavour (*Sadhana*) is for getting the right to utter this one word. So many, in my language and other languages, are doing the same *Sadhana*. Some are ahead of me. I wonder at their speed. Amongst these who are behind, any one can surge forward. Creativity is a slow cycling race. One who is the last, may be declared a winner.

The writer expects recognition. I too. But recognition is not an end in itself. The genuine justification is in the effort, struggle. To use Ramkrishna Paramhansa's image we all are like dolls of salt, and we are out to fathom the depth of an ocean. We can fathom it only when we dissolve. The doll of salt does not come back to tell her experience. The writer has to struggle a little more. He has to dissolve himself and keeping his inner self intact must return to narrate his experience. I am struggling to do this. I have a reputation of being modest; but I am ambitious enough to think that one day I may be able to narrate this huge experience through a major work.

I have faith in miracles. A green blade of grass coming out of the earth is a great miracle. Morning rays spreading their golden hue on the icy heights of the Himalayas, what is this if not a miracle?

I can not live without writing, but I am not under the illusion that what I write covers the whole life. Life was there even before I started to create. It will be there when I cease to write in this birth. I have tried to sweeten a little bit of this vastness with the nectar of human relationships. This life has its extension in my predecessors, in my contemporaries and in writers who will emerge in future. I aspire that a few moments of my creativity can be a homage to the past, satisfy the present and may lend fragrance to at least one breath of the future.

When I say these words, I know I am taking a big leap in the arena of ambition. If I do not succeed and fall I am sure the delicate texture woven by your feeling will catch me unhurt. I am sure you will pardon me as you all believe, 'one may pardon missing the target; but keeping in easy target can never be pardoned."

[Speech delivered at the 'Meet the Author' programme organised by the Sahitya Akademi in Bombay on 19-9-1989.]

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EMPTY HANDED

K.S. Duggal

THEY had returned empty-handed once again. Krishna and Kanha. Neither of them had been selected for employment. Luck had not favoured them again. They had resolved that if either of them got selected, he would look after the other as long as the other remained unemployed.

These were accursed times. It was going to be more than a year since they had graduated. They had tried their utmost but had not succeeded in securing any employment. Wherever they had gone, 'No Vacancy' notices had stared at them in their faces.

Someone had told them that so-and-so had succeeded in getting selected because his mother had taken him to a temple and he had propitiated the deity before going for the interview. Having heard this, everytime they received a call for an interview, Krishna would go to a temple and Kanha to a Gurdwara. They bowed, they kneeled, they prayed but to no avail. They continued to be unemployed.

Krishna and Kanha were sons of refugees who had settled down in a village in Rajasthan .... After their matriculation, they insisted that they would go to a city for their higher studies. Their impoverished parents had to scrounge every paisa they could to support them through these years. Every month they would receive a money order and on time. And they always made a pledge with themselves that after completing their studies they would pay back their debt many times over. They would go to the village like big officers and repay their parents for all they had done for them. Now that they had completed their studies, their self-respect did not allow them to ask for any more money from their parents. But they could find no job at all.

They had both passed their matriculation with credit. They had also done equally well in their degree

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examination. And yet now they had to go from pillar to post looking for a job.

Their parents were as much distressed. They had exhausted all their resources. They had mortgaged the farm-land alloted to them to be able to support them year after year. And now they waited month after month without any news from them.

Krishna and Kanha's parents had belonged to the same village in Pakistan before they were driven out. Krishna's father had certified Kanha's father's overblown claim and in return Krishna's father's benamis had been testified by Kanha's father as being legitimate. Thus both of them had succeeded in getting a lot more land allotted to them, than was their due.

Now both of them sat in the *takya* and were waiting for their sons' return, who had not come back nor even written to them. It was now going to be a year, maybe even more, since their results had been declared. They fully knew that their sisters were due to be married. They had been engaged for a long time. But first-born, it was their bounden duty to attend to that before settling down themselves.

Not for a moment did Krishna and Kanha forget that either. Carrying their degrees which they had earned after working very hard, they knocked at every door which held any prospect but to no success. Wherever they went, they were told that either that particular vacancy had already been filled up on an adhoc basis and now an exercise was on to regularise the selection or that such-and-such VIP had intervened and the post must be given to his nominee. They were sick and tired of hearing it. No one even cared to look at their degrees or the excellent testimonials they had been given.

Then they heard that it was being bruited that academic degree, good or bad, need not necessarily be the criterion for the selection of a candidate for employment in government service.

'So that the politicians are saved the trouble of having to inveigle to get their candidates through the back door,' Krishna remarked cynically.

Helpless Kanha looked into the void that was facing them.

Their savings were fast diminishing, while there was not even a ray of hope. They were getting panicky. They had already scaled down their sights. Forgetting their ambition of gazetted post, they now started looking for class II and class III posts of assistants and clerks, and yet met with little success.

Then they arrived at a stage when they were completely broke—both of them. They had no money at all. Rajasthan was not

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far and they could have gone to their parents. But they wouldn't even think of it. They would rather starve. And starve they did. They had nothing to eat for the last two days. The *dhabawala* where they used to eat, stopped giving them anything on credit any more.

One fateful morning they decided to offer themselves for employment as class IV employees! They were prepared to work even as a *daftry* or *chaprasi* or even a *farrash*. Krishna was rejected because he looked woefully emaciated. (He had not eaten for the previous two days.) And Kanha was not selected because they felt that since he had a first class degree, he would never stick to the post; he was merely using it as a stepping stone.

Both Krishna and Kanha had once again drawn a blank. Fate had not favoured them. As they were coming back, feeling frustrated and forlorn, they happened to pass by the railway station. Something struck him like a flash, so Krishna looked at Kanha. Kanha could clearly read his companion's face. He gave an immediate assent with a nod. They were both starving. They had to earn something in order to eat.

Hardly had they entered the railway platform when a train steamed in. The train stopped and a crowd of passengers alighted. But their turn was after regular, licenced porters had found their customers. So they waited patiently. Their turn did come. An army officer, perhaps on transfer, had several articles of luggage. He beckoned Krishna and Kanha. As they were struggling with the officer's huge trunk, they happened to look at the army officer's face from close quarters, and found to their horror that he was from their village. Infact, he was their neighbour and from the same street. They left the trunk where it was and vanished into the melting crowd. He was a local Rajput and not a refugee; yet he did belong to their village. What would he think? What would he go and tell their people when he returns to their village?

Krishna and Kanha were let down by fate once again.

They were exhausted and famished. Their legs were about to give way. As they walked out of the station knowing not what to do, and where to go, they noticed an empty stationary coach off the platform. They badly needed some rest. It was also bitterly cold. The coach could provide them shelter for a while. They got into the empty coach and sat on a seat near the door, close to a window. It was indeed cosy and snug in the compartment. They didn't speak to each other. What was there to talk about?

Sitting in the empty compartment, defeated and in a state of exhaustion, they dozed off, both of them. Then a sudden jolt and

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they opened their eyes. The train was moving. As they got up to jump out, they heard the plea of a woman with a bundle on her shoulder and holding another in her left hand, pleading for help to enable her enter the compartment. Krishna extended his helping hand and Kanha also helped her to carry the bundle which she was holding in her left hand and they succeeded in pulling the woman to get into the compartment.

In the meanwhile the train had left the platform far behind. It was already in the yard and had picked up speed.

Krishna and Kanha found themselves in an empty railway compartment all alone with a stranger woman, who was thanking them profusely; she had sat down on a seat in a corner away from them.

What is it that had happened?

The two youngman were lost in thought. Wild thinking perhaps! But they didn't have to share it with each other. It was writ large on their faces. The woman was laden with jewellery—necklace and pendant, bangles and rings with inset diamonds glowing in the fast falling darkness of winter evening. Clad in tussar *salwar-kameez* and a chiffon *dupatta,* didn't she feel the cold? Well, there is such a thing as the warmth of being wealthy!

And she was not bad to look at either. Why, infact, she was quite a beauty! Olive colour. So what? Chiselled features. Bright eyes. Broad forehead of a well-bred person. At the most she would be in her thirties. Just the age for ...

A passenger with so much jewellery on her person, God alone knows what she was carrying in those bundles! And there were two of them.

Krishna thought, he would pounce upon her and strangle her to death. And while he would be on it, Kanha would relieve her of all her jewellery. And then they would throw her body out of the running train. He didn't know how he had suddenly begun to feel as though he was seething with energy. Kanha was filled with lust. He would strip her and rape her once, twice, three times before finishing with her. Krishna could follow him if he wanted to, but he must have her first.

Both Krishna and Kanha were peering out of their window, getting ready for the assault, or perhaps weighing the pros and cons of it. They held each other's hand and pressed them together. The palms of their hands were wet with perspiration. They both felt they must act fast; they hadn't much time to lose.

'God bless you brothers! Do take care of my baby for a while. I'll be back in a moment.' And she walked across to the toilet and

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bolted it from inside.

God, she was a mother! The bundle she had tucked under her arm was her baby wrapped all over to protect him from the cold. And what a lovely child it was! Lying on his seat how he was moving his arms and legs playfully!

'Oh, she is the mother of a child.'

'God bless you ...' her words were echoing in their ears. A mother who wishes everyone well. Words of benediction for all mankind!

And now the child was looking at them. As if he was trying to know who they were. Trying to ask them to come over. Inviting them to pick him up in their arms.

In the meanwhile the train had started losing speed. It seemed that they were nearing a station. Krishna looked at Kanha and Kanha looked back at Krishna. The mother of the baby was still in the toilet. The train had slowed down.

Opening the door, they quietly jumped out. They were not carrying any tickets, it would be risky to find themselves on the platform at the next station. □

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THE SKELETON

Ram Sarup Anakhi

SHE has dark spots of half moon size under both her eyes, abscesses in the cavity of her bare gums, hanging breasts; eyes filled with extreme sadness and a gait that no longer attracts any one. She talks as if she has had enough roughing at home. A teacher with driver-cut beard and moustaches has corrupted her name too: Malkiat Kaur has thus become 'Balan Kaur'. Thin and frail, almost invisible dead-like, she is like a fuel near the oven, likely to catch fire any moment.

It was her first day at school after her marriage. Many of her female colleagues were not only pleased but also were proud about her marriage. Her male colleagues too frequently discussed her marriage.

"Look at 'Balan Kaur's' face; looks as if a bitch has just fled from a cattle's bone-field," a sharp eyed teacher with a hissing sound remarked as he looked at her painted lips. The laughter in the band of teachers was high-pitched, to the sky. The Punjabi teacher with a flowing beard and loose turban expressed his deep sympathy:

"This poor thing will also contribute her share to this world now."

The teacher with driver-cut beard remarked again:

"Her husband had better married a goat. Would have got some milk atleast." The short hissing teacher began to leap up at his remarks as he laughed.

"Will she be able to conceive? I don't think she has got any sexual urge left at this ripe age of thirty two or three."

On the other front, some of her fellow teachers were touching her ear-rings, some others asked her to let them put on her white slippers on their own feet. One of them was pinching her suit and the other was staring at her face.

Malkiat Kaur had seated herself in an arm chair like a queen. Whenever her colleagues asked something about her, she would reply to them in a grave but polite tone. With her dupatta wrapped around her body, she looked very gentle and charming on that day! But all her colleagues were happy that some one came forward to marry her at last.

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Her father had retired from the Indian Army a long time back. He had two sons and two daughters and both his sons were elder to his daughters and had been married since long. They were already discontented with their father's strict and dominant manners and had set their homes apart. The elder of the two daughters was married even before her brother. When Malkiat, her sister, grew up to adolescence, her father sent her to school and after her matriculation, she also passed the junior basic training for teaching. She got a job as a regular primary school teacher after some time and had already been teaching for seven or eight years when she was married.

In fact, her father wanted her to marry a noble boy from a rich family. When she passed her teacher's training and started bringing home her salary every month, her father felt exhilarated and boasted : "Scores of boys from 'Jat' families would solicit her hand." Of course he visited many places to choose a bride-groom for her but was not able to find a suitable match. If a boy had a large cultivated land, he was himself not much handsome. If someone had both these qualities, he would be illiterate. If some boy was literate and quite handsome, he would not have even a furrow of land. If the ex-serviceman father liked and found all the three qualities in some boy, he would start talking in a down-right manner :

"Our daughter is not for carrying cow-dung" or "She will not tolerate her mother-in-law's rebuke", or "She will not resign her job," or "She will eat and dress according to her taste" and so on. Her father had spent four or five years that way.

Each month, Malkiat handed over her salary to her father. He, in turn, would deposit a hundred rupees in the post-office in her account. More than five thousand rupees had already been credited to her account that way.

Malkiat was not like other girls. She always obeyed her father. She sat down where her father directed her to sit and she put on what her father brought her to wear. She acted on her father's instructions because she was very gentle and reticent. But she was getting older day by day. Her father had not been able to find any boy to marry her. Had she been bold, she would herself have chosen some boy of her age and told her father: "Father, I have found my life-partner." But she was not a girl of that kind. She was as modest as a cow, and thought, her father would hand her over to some one at the right time and whosoever held her reins would be her husband, her master.

Her youth waned as the days passed; her dreams beguiled; her beauty faded. She lost her vigour. Her passbook showed a credit

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balance of six thousand rupees. Sometimes she felt like burning it down and fleeing her home with a water carrier's son and put her scoundrel father's beard to flames. But she was not a girl of that type. She was in fact a gentle daughter of her father. Tempted by Malkiat's six thousand rupees deposited in the post office and her handsome salary, a *gram sevak* boy fell into the ex-serviceman's trap. This boy was hardly twenty three and had some land as his share of family property. He was a handsome and educated boy, of course.

Malkiat's mother and her ex-serviceman father were both happy. She was quite happy herself. So were all.

Now Malkiat had come to school after her marriage and all her colleagues were crying with joy. She had come to school very early that day. Hardly had the limping peon opened the iron-gate, when she stepped in and the peon congratulated her. Malkiat just laughed and brought her coy face close to her left shoulder. On her entering the gate, some middle-standard students had rushed to her and stared at her impressionless face. Everyone gazed keenly at this newly married girl.

The *gram sevak* was happy that his wife earned more than he did himself. Above all, Malkiat had in her possession six thousand rupees which practically meant that he had all that money. His father, mother and all other relations were pleased because he had found a hen which laid eggs throughout the year and the whole family could feed on her income alone.

One day, a meeting of all the *gram sevaks* of the block was held in the town. Malkiat's husband took her along as she had to buy some cloth and other household wares. While her husband attended the meeting, she spent her time in her friend's house and after the meeting was over, the husband took her to the town-market.

The first day of the month had just passed and his colleagues also went to the market for shopping. When they happened to see Malkiat in the market buying things alongwith her husband, their eyes were wide-opened in amazement. Looking at her sullen face, feeble body and sunken eyes, they burst into a laughter and clapped their hands. In the next meeting, when all of them gathered again, they took Malkiat's husband to task. One of them remarked on his face : "Your wife looks as if she were your mother."

"You only took her salary into consideration and nothing else." Another colleague of his caught him by his shoulder and said :

"This log-like body of yours that is stout now, will be squeezed like a lemon and you will also become like her." A fellow *gram sevak* felt sorry for him, at their uneven match.

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Malkiat's husband heard their remarks with a low profile. He began to perspire when one of his colleagues with mischievious eyes asked him :

"Brother, where did you purchase that skeleton from?"

On returning home, he felt as if Malkiat's entire body was stinking, her hands were an old woman's. With her sullen and sunken face, she truly looked as if she were his mother. So he did not spread his cot near hers that night; instead went to sleep in their cattle house outside the village.

Time went on; but Malkiat began to feel an odour coming out of her body, much like that from a dead stinking mouse. Her body seemed to her as a stuffed dried skin of a buffalo. Her own soul deposed that her husband had not married her but her post office savings and the salary she got each month.

She used to come to her school on a bicycle from her husband's village and return very sad and depressed. She did not have that fresh vigour that the newly married girls usually have. Her husband now visited his village only once in a week and spent many nights out. Whenever he chose to come to her, he never talked to her with love. Malkiat knew that there was no difference between her father's house and that of her husband. There, her father captured her money and here, her husband grabbed it each month gulped and belched the whole amount.

He also withdrew two hundred or five hundred rupees from the post office at regular intervals so that there were only two thousand rupees left in her account. He had got costly trousers and suits for himself; four pairs of shoes and six turbans. Quite often, he would sit in the company of his friends and buy wine for all. When he returned home, his pocket was always empty. Besides he had spent thousand rupees on his nephew's marriage.

In her teachers' training course, she had a classfellow Sharanpal by name. She was not a blazing beauty; yet she appealed to one's eye. A handsome boy studying with them and belonging to a well-off family used to tease her. One day, Sharanpal took off one of her shoes and told him as if about to strike him with it: "If you consider yourself the son of a rich father, act as such at his place. What do you think of others' honour, you rascal?"

"Neither am I rich nor the son of a rich father. You are not another one for me. I don't tease you to make mischief. I tease you because I love you," the boy replied in a very humble voice. They were betrothed as soon as their examinations were over.

Whenever Malkiat recollected Sharanpal, she heaved a deep sigh

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and felt as if a heavy mountain had been placed on her chest. A boy used to keep an eye on her too in those days. He was very gentle and modest. One day, he took one of Malkiat's note books and wrote down his name on it. When Malkiat found his name written in there, she began to cry in the presence of all her friends and lodged a complaint to the school Headmaster who in turn rebuked the boy, warned him and fined him two rupees. It was not a very serious crime anyway and the punishment not so severe, but the boy was so ashamed of this disgrace that he discontinued the course and got a job as a bus-conductor in a Transport company.

Malkiat now remembered that boy too alongwith Sharanpal. "If only I had not complained to the Headmaster against him:" "If only he had not been fined and had felt no disgrace!" Had he not left his studies, may be she would have fallen in love with him! Then she was likely to be betrothed to that fellow as Sharanpal had been to her lover! It would have been really a pleasure to marry in that age! But now when she was married at last, Sharanpal was already having two offsprings; a daughter and a healthy son.

These thoughts made her numb. She felt that she had aged ten times in an year. She would run her fingers on her lips to find them dry and parched. Her hands felt wrinkles on her forehead. Her hands and fingers themselves had lost their usual suppleness; her calves had only skin and no flesh.

Now she lived at her father's house for a week and at her in-laws the next week because her school was at an equal distance from both the villages and she could attend to her duty from either place daily.

Once, as she got her salary on the first day of the month, she went to her father's house, threw the pay-packet at her father's feet and began to cry. In a broken voice she said to him : "Bapuji, I am your earning daughter and all my earnings in future are yours." Sobbing, she clung to her father's legs. □

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YOUR MILK, THIS!

Kulwant Singh Virk

WHOSOEVER had the chance to see her was willing to lay a wager: that Kamla was not a day older than twenty-five years. The fact being that she was nowhere less than thirty-five or even forty. It was her well-nourished, supple body that often misled people about her age.

She was neither too plump nor too thin; neither exceptionally tall nor extraordinarily short. Well aware that a white dress suited her milky, soft complexion well, she would always prefer to dress herself up in white. Though she couldn't boast of youthful ardour anymore, she was still charming enough to turn the heads of even the most shy among men.

Ordinarily, the people who work in the offices don't have much to either conflate or boast about. And how can they, when nothing of any significance ever happens in their lives? All they do day in and day out is make routine jottings in the files which can certainly not be described as of any significance. But Kamla's husband Manmohan Lal was indeed luckier in this respect as he got to experience his moments of greatness all too often. Extremely fond of talking about his wife, he would do so whenever he could. And this would happen all the time as he was not the kind who would ever tire of singing hosannas to her. Whenever his colleagues got together for any occasion, whether it was to welcome a new boss or bid farewell to an old one, celebrate a marriage or mourn a death, Kamla would never fail to make a lasting impression on everyone present. And seeing this, Manmohan Lal's chest would swell an inch or two with proprietorial pride.

Of course, he had his own reasons to feel the way he did. Not only was she exceptionally beautiful and sweet-tempered, she had an excellent reputation to boot. Wags were always around to spin yarns about others' wives but not her. She hardly did or said anything that could set the tongues wagging.

Manmohan Lal's duty as an auditor was such that, quite often, he had to be away on long tours to other districts. Sometimes, these

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tours stretched into eight or even ten days. Whenever he would be away, Kamla felt positively listless. With him around, her face would glow with a rare charm. And when he left, it would appear to her as though the house had become lifeless, very much like a circus without an elephant or a marriage party without a groom.

This time round Manmohan Lal had been gone for five days and it was expected that he would not be back for another three. As days rolled by, Kamla waited; her restlessness mounting and longing becoming sharper with each passing moment. Everything around her, the house, the food, the neighbours, had a ring of familiarity about them, yet it was not the same. She felt as if someone had cheated her of a thick layer of cream, leaving her daily glass of milk skimmed and tasteless.

Suddenly a strange thing happened. The dull ache of Manmohan Lal's absence lifted away, and the taste of the top layer of cream returned once again. It is another matter that the whole experience didn't last for more than a day.

An old man used to come to their house twice, in the mornings and evenings, to deliver milk. He had made it a practice of sauntering straight into the verandah, of walking up to the kitchen door and settling his can of milk on the floor as soon as he got there. Slackening his grip on the handle, he would let it fall on the sides of the can with a clanging sound. This was his curious way of announcing his arrival. Slowly his voice would rise above the clanging murmur, "Your milk, this!" The maid would appear from behind the kitchen door, holding a pan firmly in her hands. Measuring out the required quantity, he would pour it into the pan with such precision that not a drop would ever spill on to the floor. Only when he turned to leave, dragging his feet along the floor would his shoes creak, making a sound. Each movement of his appeared to have a studied quality, and each gesture a certain practised ease.

This morning, an altogether different character made an unexpected and somewhat abrupt entry into the familiar act. "Your milk, this!" a vibrant voice rang out loud and clear. 'The old man must have sent one of his sons today' mused Kamla, turning over to the other side of the cot. Not that she had anything much to occupy her mind with, but this was certainly beneath her attention. How did it matter as to who delivered the milk, the old man or his young son! What difference would it make anyway? When the milk was delivered in the mornings, she would still be indoors, resting with her eyes shut or simply lolling in the bed, even if awake.

In the evening, when the same young man came once again to

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deliver the milk, it so happened that the maid was not at home. "Your milk, this!" he announced rather hoarsely. Kamla stepped out. One furtive glance and she was convinced that the young man was truly handsome. His hair cropped short and combed with great care were parted in a manner that made him look more like a Babu. He didn't have the glazed look of a weary traveller. Instead, his eyes, sparkling with nervous excitement, darted around rather freely. 'How different are these youngsters from their fathers!' Kamla thought all to herself. Abstractedly, she held out her hand with the pan and let him pour out the milk. Having poured the required amount, the young fellow turned back and left as mechanically as he had come. No sooner had he left, Kamla too put him completely out of her mind.

The next morning, the young man turned up all over again. This time the maid was around. Tossing and turning in her bed, Kamla got a palpable feeling as if he was engaged in a rather intimate conversation with the maid. 'What must they be whispering about?' wondering all to herself, Kamla became restless, 'One should always keep track of whatever happens under one's own nose.' And the very next moment, she was standing beside the closed door, listening to their conversation without the fear of being found out.

"Here is another half a litre. So this makes it two litres," said the young man, emptying out the last drop into the pan.

"Weh, why don't you put a little extra," demanded the maid, sounding somewhat coquettish. Listening to them, anyone could make out that they had already struck up some sort of intimacy.

"Take it, if you insist. But this is only for you," the young man winked, pouring out another half á litre.

Then it appeared as if he whispered something into the maid's ears, in response to which she drawled half-compromisingly, "Don't you ever do that. It could have soiled my clothes, you know."

Suddenly realizing that their whispering sounds might arouse the suspicion of the *bibi* in the room next, she raised her voice to add, "Weh, you should come early in the morning. Kids start wailing with hunger." Though it sounded more like a mild admonition, from her tone it was obvious that she was struggling hard to suppress a giggle.

Returning to her bed, Kamla lay down. "One of them will have to go, either the maid or the milkman. How can I permit such an effrontery in my house? Who knows she may decide to pass on other valuables to this young fellow, then?" she cogitated.

Pacing up and down, Kamla pieced together the whole incident in an effort to make sense of whatever had happened.

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'These people really have the knack of enjoying themselves,' settling on the bed she had a sudden revelation. The boy was, undoubtedly, very handsome. Hadn't she seen him with her own eyes? And now this smart, good-looking, dapper young fellow lay wrapped around the finger of this ordinary maid.

Was she any less than the maid? The maid was certainly younger, but she was much more beautiful. Besides, she was the mistress of the house. If she wanted, she could have allowed the boy to have a free run of the house. She could make him sit on a comfortable chair or the soft, velvety sofa. Why, she could even make him lie on her bed, next to her. Oh, ... how handsome and how innocent he is! ... And she lay down, her head resting upon her crouched arm. What a mistake she had made. Yesterday, she was so weary and today it was perhaps the last day. Her husband was likely to be back in the evening. There was no telling what time he would come. Yesterday, the opportunity was a heaven-send. I should have called out from within, "Hey, why don't you come right in?" He would have come and sat cross-legged on the floor. Swinging my legs playfully, I would have sat on the bed, facing him. Dipping my finger into the milk and tapping him gently with a toe, I would have said, "Just look at this. It's so thin." With this, I would have bent forward and brushed my finger against his temples. Rubbing his cheeks, I would have tipped it slowly towards his lips. Then pressing his cheeks between my forefingers, I would have got my grip firmly on his face before giving it a good shake. He is not a fool after all. He would have caught on. And then I would have pulled him towards the bed, hoisting him up, made him lie next to me. No, no, first I would have made him sit on the armchair and drawn it near. Crouching on the bed, his face cradled safely in my hands, I would have had a long, interminable chat with him.

The wild sweep of her thoughts gave Kamla a tingling sensation. As she sailed higher, her heart beat faster as though the boy was actually sleeping in the crook of her arm. She was surprised to find her heart pounding so hard. 'No, I think it's just my feeling. How can it be? How can a mere thought send the heart thumping?' To find if it was really true, she ran her hand over the region of her heart. Yes, the beat was faster than usual, almost as if her heart had learnt to beat only now, the first time ever.

A strange thrill shook her whole body. She sat back and let it wash all over her. Trailing the same train of thought, she wondered, 'What if someone had made a surprise entry? So what? The room has several doors. If someone had knocked at one, I would have

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hustled him out of the other. And had it been one of my friends, I would have pushed him under the bed and while opening the door burst out laughing. She would have naturally asked, 'What makes you laugh?' I would have retorted, 'Guess if you can!' And her failure to guess would have made me laugh all the more.

Hiding under the bed, the boy would have listened to every word of it. And had it been someone else, someone I didn't know, I would have shoved him out of the back door, and opened the front door sleepily, yawning as though I had woken up from deep slumber just then. And again, her heart started thumping heavily as though someone had caught her stealing.

With all kinds of emotions whirring inside she couldn't decide as to what should be done. It wasn't so easy to get rid of the thoughts that came crowding into her mind. She reached out for a book, opened it to divert herself but the words blurred and slowly faded away. It seemed as if nothing would sink in.

She tuned in to the radio. Filmi songs it was blaring sounded so uninspiring now, especially in comparison to the reverie that tugged at her heart-strings that moment. As the thought of that reverie intruded, her heart beat faster. The same songs which used to pierce the tissues of her heart once, the songs which enthralled her with their haunting melody, now left her cold. She almost felt irritated listening to those songs? Why was it so? The very next moment, she switched off the radio.

In the evening, the clanging murmur of the handle falling across the milk can was heard all over again. Kamla rushed to the door. Of course, it was too late to make any overture. Her husband could turn up any moment. Drawn irresistibly, she moved towards the door. If nothing else, she could at least catch a glimpse of that boy. She could always tuck away his image in the secret zones of her heart where she could return anytime and dwell as long as she wanted.

Pushing the door, she flung it open. The boy hadn't come. Instead, his old father stood in the doorway, waiting to pour the milk. Her flush gone, Kamla felt as if someone had emptied a canful of sand over her raging flames. The fever subsided, and once again, she became the same old Kamla—Manmohan Lal's wife. □

Translated from Punjabi by Rana Nayar

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THE PALLBEARERS

Prem Prakash

FOR the last ten years there has been no increase in the population of the town ... It is now on the decrease, despite marriages and child births.

He had come back to the town after about eight years. Darkness enveloped him as he left the station. He wrapped himself up tight in his blanket. It was not that cold. His face had disappeared. The lanes were dark. Even the dogs did not feel like barking. Neither was there any human voice ... The wind was whistling a discordant note.

A shade hurriedly came across him as he negotiated the lane this side of the *peepal* tree of the outcastes, compound by the dwelling of his mother. A thin dirty hand thrust itself forward from a torn sheet to cover his mouth ... "Can I have a globule of opium?"

"No, I have none," he heard a voice, not his own.

"In that case, shoot me down ... I am not a ghost ... You can have a good look at me ... There would be a pool of blood where I fall ... It would be there in the picture in the morning papers. Your name would be published, and mine, too."

As he progressed the cry of the ghost swept the lane from this side to the other ... "O you dead! Sleep well bolting and fastening the doors."

He reached his mother's. There was no response to the first knock at the door.

With the second knock ... things began to stir inside.

On the third knock, his mother plaintively asked, "Is it *Ram Rakha*?"*

He could make out that his brother had hidden himself behind the door after lowering the bolt.

As he went to ease himself in the morning in the far-off fields, none of the villagers seemed to recognise him ... Kundan, the carpenter, was making a bier before the gate of Lala Amar Nath ... Early in the morning! No idea of firing at night ... The police must have been reported to ... The post-mortem ... and now the last rites ... How efficient!

---

* The one protected by God.

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On his return, he joined the tail-end of the mourners. People walked in groups dicussing in whispers sensational news, matrimonials in progress, prices and new kinds of business which made millionaires in days.

"How the lane has been ruined! full of pits ... Men, carrying the bier, cannot walk straight," said Mallan Singh, the Jat.

"Uncle, we must have a pucca road to the spot," said Santu, the barber, "a philanthropic act ... Why don't the village elders in the Panchayat take it up ... Impose a hearth tax ... What do you think Lala Ji?"

"I would do it." Lala Amar Nath felt as if the words were not his ... neither the voice.

He quietly beckoned his nephew to his side to say this. The nephew came out with "When I follow the bier I always sense a strange being accompanying us ... At times the being appears human but without a shadow ... At times it is felt to be a voice, coming out of a toothless mouth. The tongue is in tatters."

"We would make the road pucca, of baked bricks," said the landowner Shamsher Singh.

"Uncle, the bricks must stand one on the other, they are not to be laid flat ... so they do not break", advised Kundan, the carpenter.

"What Nathu said about the eerie being is quite different from what Rikhi, the Pundit says." He recognised Ashwathama in him, roaming about from the times of Mahabharata ... Now he is a dwarf, then an elf only to grow tall like an acacia tree after sometime ... The ancient sore on the forehead is running. He keeps a bowl with him."

"Begging bowl?"

"No. One full of ointment ... He sticks his finger and applies ointment to his forehead."

"Hasn't he got well by now? ... The arrow had struck him a thousand years ago."

"How could he be cured of the wound of curses! It would open up time and again."

"Boys! change the pallbearers ... The youngsters have a lot to carry."

"Never mind, the cremation ground is round the corner."

"But, uncle, the cremation ground has lost its dimensions ... If there are three bodies to burn we have an antheap of humanity over here ... On top of it if it also rains ...

"We would fix it," said Lala Amar Nath, "We must get it finished."

"Surprisingly in the City you give a ring to the Red Cross Van and rush to give a bath to the corpse ... By the time you wrap around

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the shroud, the van is there at your doorstep. Stick the dead man on the iron railings. Four men lift it, make the corpse bow to the gods and slide it into the van. Presto, and it goes. The van accommodates a few members of the family too. Within five minutes you reach the cremation ground. The townsmen call it *Shivpuri*." Informed the elder son of Santu, the barber, who shaved his customers on the roadside, "Uncle ... wood, flowers, priest, the shades of trees and bamboo roofs to sit under, water taps to bathe, everything is there. The cremation platform, too, is covered. Burning the corpse is just like a *havan* ceremony. You get back in an hour ..."

"I'll see to the end of all the snags ... We'll build *Shivpuri* in the garden over the distributory. Walls on each side would be eight feet high. Here dogs are a nuisance ... The family turns its back after lighting the pyre and the dogs are ready to drag the corpse ... Beyond the jackals are howling."

"Uncle, we'll leave nothing undone. Put in our best efforts," said the grandson of a man who has a house with a big door.

"Son, that is what we do, exactly that is what we do ... people would be excited about the burning ground ."

"Ram Singh, where did the bullet strike? Can't see it anywhere."

"He was struck in the chest ... The side has been sewed up after the post-mortem."

"I was wondering ... no hole to be seen."

"It is at the back."

"Not one, but two" quietly said Sukh Ram and withdrew from the flames.

"Milkhi Ram! I gather the Comrade was not struck at all. No question of a bullet-mark."

"That! The son and the daughter-in-law were both in politics. A saving of the winter bedding."

"How is that?" Mehru asked in surprise.

"The Comrade had been shouting at them for the last two years and half. He challenged them to shoot him in the chest ... And then ... They came one night. The octogenarian wanted to be shot in the bed. They wanted him to stand by the compound wall. The old man would not oblige ... At last the son and the daughter-in-law pleaded, 'the children would be scared of shooting ...' The Comrade fell with a thud after the report ... The bullet hit the wall. How can you have a hole in the corpse?"

"If you want a dog to be shot in the city, you have to bribe the Municipal gunman ... then ..." The nephew of the barber remarked.

"I feel the presence of the strange being again." It was a frightened voice.

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"I have heard it as well ... exactly the one of the tattered tongue."

"Could you follow what it said?"

"Khh ... khh was a stutter ... Then it was a storm whistling through the bamboo tree ... Followed by the cry of cats ... climaxed with a band playing to the marriage party."

"Lo! enjoying his music for nothing ..."

"Let us go in for bath. The pyre has been lighted."

"Tut tut—washing face and hands is more than enough ... The pyres are a daily affair ..."

On the third day he came out again wrapped in blanket. Crossing the bridge over the distributory he found the townsmen in the garden of the Lala. Bricks, cement, iron, everything was there. The boundary wall around the garden was being raised. A large shed had been constructed. A spacious hall too. Water taps by the well. The old trees had been felled, new plants in rows were being nursed. Large-sized cooking plates were steaming in the sheds. Women were cooking chapatis and men, eating in rows.

Here and there some one would stand up. The one who saw the strange being or heard its voice from the tattered tongue. As if a whirlwind had shot through the bamboo.

"Did you hear the voice, grandfather?" asked the youth whose jaw had paralysed while eating.

"No, son. I am hard of hearing."

"But you must have seen the strange being?"

"Quite, please. When I tried watering the plants, stuck in the ground, a being was withholding my arm."

"Rikhi, the Pundit was right ... Ashwathama is around, a pot of ointment in his hand ... The wound in the forehead has not been cured," said Lakhbir, the teacher.

"Lalaji, *Shivpuri* is going to be more beautiful than our habitation *Swargpuri*."

"But it would not match the ones in the cities", said the barber.

"What did you say?" the Lala was piqued. "Just you say, the thing will be built ... what is wealth for?"

"I suggest it to you. Why not all of us live here? ... Save the bother of lifting the biers ... The poor pallbearers are tired," suggested Nathu the betel-leaf seller.

"Nothing to worry, my young prince. I have spoken to the landlord. We are going to buy the Red Cross Van ... The dead from miles around would congregate here. What a sight!" □

Translated from Punjabi by Surjit Hans

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I'M NO GAZNAVI

Gurbachan Bhullar

AFTER an interval of so many years, renewal of this urge to meet Jassi has left me rather surprised. For me, it is nothing short of an attempt to transgress that invisible Lakshman-rekha my mind had drawn all on its own around my life-space once.

To say that there was any compulsion or a hastily taken vow behind this decision of not meeting her all these years would be a plain lie. The truth is that my mind had just tied itself up into a decision, if it could be called one-a well thought out, conscious decision. Hardly that, it was an escape really, a release from the state of indecision.

As a matter of fact, I had never thought of her as someone different, someone not already an inseparable part of me. She had always had a presence in my mind, a rather strange, inexplicable presence. She had come to inhabit that zone of my mind where desire for physical proximity does not simply exist.

Even if I had tried my level best, I would not have been able to forget all that I had shared with Jassi as just another inconsequential event or put it all on the shelf like the closed chapter of an overread, long-forgotten book. Each time I would think of her, a familiar tune would return to my lips:

> My heart leaps up in pride
> When you call me your own ..

Whenever I would hum this song, sitting beside Jassi she would never fail to reproach me with her eyes as if to say, 'Why can't you think of a more imaginative way of flattering me? Why repeat a stale filmi song I have already heard so many times over?' Sometimes she would say that she was not the kind of a person who would allow herself to be flattered by my paeans of false praise. And when she would be in a mood to tease me, she would say that I sing not to her glory but my own, thinking of myself as a hero of some cheap Hindi movie. Well aware of my intense dislike for the Bollywood stuff, she

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would take a special delight in reducing it to a harmless little joke.

To be honest, not even once did it occur to me that I should lead Jassi on and much less that I should project myself as a filmi hero. I had reasons to be genuinely proud of my friendship with her.

Jassi was a beautiful girl. Extremely beautiful. To say that her beauty was non-pareil would be no exaggeration.

They say, beauty does not lie in the object so much as it does in the eyes of the beholder. But Jassi's beauty did not just lie in the way in which I would look at her. Perhaps it was that too. But I would like to believe that there was more to it than this. Her beauty had a life of its own, a space outside the realm of my perception. Very beautiful. Very beautiful indeed!

Now when I think about her, my hand involuntarily reaches out for the pen she had gifted me once and I wish to scribble another story with it or long to read the comments she had scrawled on the margins of my books sometimes in half-seriousness or pure levity. On all such occasions, I find myself searching rather desperately for that letter Raju had written me, carefully pull it out of a heap of others in my personal file, read and re-read it. By now I must have already repeated the act almost a hundred times over. So well do I know the contents by heart right down to the last full stop that I do not even have to read it now. Yet the irresistible desire to dig up the letter and feel the softness of its touch between my fingers never quite ceases to chase me.

Several years after she had gone out of my life, Jassi had been spotted once by Raju at the Ludhiana railway station. Being a close friend, Raju knew exactly what the nature of our relationship had been and how much she had meant to me. Having met Raju only briefly once or twice, she was not so friendly with him as to be able to discuss our relationship uninhibitedly in his presence. Besides, Jassi was being accompanied by a gentleman who was perhaps her husband. Why perhaps, he must surely be her husband. That is why Raju had avoided greeting her though he hadn't quite forgotten to scribble a few lines about this unexpected encounter and mail the letter to me from the station itself. It seems he was in such a hurry to let me know about it that he couldn't even wait till he had bought himself a proper envelope. He had simply folded up that piece of paper, tucked one end into another and put down my address onto one side thus using it up as an unstamped envelope of sorts.

The message ran somewhat like this, "Just now I have seen Jassi at the Ludhiana station. Wish I could pack my eyes off so that you could see what I did."

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I had assured him that there was no need for him to do any such thing. Since I had the power to envision her as and when I desired to. For this I had not felt the need to turn to my personal album either which carried her photograph. Her face was as clearly etched in my mind as would be the impression of a framed photograph which always remains in focus by virtue of it being placed rather prominently on the wall-shelf. Wasn't she an icon, after all, perched on the shelf of my mind?

One often comes across hordes of beautiful girls. In a manner of speaking, every girl is beautiful. Only some are more so. But a few so beautiful that they would simply take one's breath away. One does not quite know what to say for a flower that has its stems pruned and leaves trimmed so that it can show its beauty forth, and then sways in gentle breeze with a pride that comes from owning up the entire garden. A flower should look appealing the way it is, irrespective of how or where it blooms. Whoever looks at it should simply hold his breath to blurt out no more than this, 'Oh, my God!'

Not only was Jassi beautiful, she also stood out as an exception to the general law of nature most of us believe in. They say, those who are blessed with beauty are often denied the boon of intelligence. But if man can violate the laws of nature, I'm sure, God too can sometimes take the liberty to do so. Her beautiful body contained her brains with the same ease with which a gold vessel would hold elixir.

In fact, it was her simplicity that lent an unspeakable glow to Jassi's inner/outer beauty. Totally unconcerned about her looks, she would not even care to run a comb through her hair, leaving them tousled and unkempt. Not very meticulous about her dress either, she would often wear unironed, crumpled clothes. Once she had given me her photograph that showed her in her rumpled best, her duppatta thrown carelessly over her shoulders. As she told me later, the photograph was taken expressly with the idea of being sent with a form.

"It seems you had it taken from some amateur who used an old-fashioned tripod-camera to take it," I had suggested with the familiar grin on my face.

"Oh yes, this was done when I happened to be visiting a fair", she had retorted, joining me in the banter.

"Then you should have done what most women do on such occasions. You should have thrust that arm of yours forward on which you tie the wrist-watch," I had teased her, putting my left arm forward.

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Today on Raju's invitation when I was about to set off to meet Jassi, for once I thought let me have another look at that photograph of hers before I start. I had barely thought of the idea when her face started hovering before my eyes. In my mind's eye, her face was as fresh as it had been when we used to meet almost every other day. Everything was intact, her beauty, her intelligence, her simplicity and her innocence. Thinking of her I would often feel what one might on entering a temple on a dark night, when the light suddenly comes on, flashing and revealing the hidden smile of a deity.

When we had met the first time, Jassi was already engaged to be married and I was married. She was to be married off soon after her M.A. examination. But she had to bid me farewell much earlier than that. Her father had been transferred out of town and as he was going on a promotion he was naturally not inclined to get his transfer order scrapped. In fact, they were just waiting for Jassi's exams to get over.

Ordinary trash that most people talk while in love had always failed to strike a chord in me even though I was quite emotional in my own way. Left to myself I would have loved to wander around with the restlessness of a waterfall that brings down boulders as it falls from a great height or cuts through the rough edges of the hills, surging ahead to make a meandering path for itself. However, Jassi's company invariably had a sobering effect on me. I would feel totally at peace with myself almost as if I had touched the plains and started flowing in a serene, unperturbed manner.

Before going away when Jassi came to meet me the last time, I couldn't say even for the sake of saying it or rather couldn't get myself to say to her that I would not be able to live without her. Even Jassi was more than usually self-possessed and did not make any emotional demands on me. All the same, our meeting had turned sentimental, perhaps for the first time ever. But we had kept our feelings in check so as to avoid getting swept off our feet.

At the time of departure, she had promised that she would write to me as soon as she reached home.

I had narrated to her the story of my foster-sister who had somehow made it a practice of sending me Rakhi every year. Soonafter she got married, she had written to me with a heavy heart saying, "Veer, don't even write to me. You never know how my husband may react now ..."

I had told Jassi that I would never write to her though in my thoughts I would continue to invoke blessings upon her, even pray for her well-being, no matter where she was. Even she had not insisted

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upon keeping the relationship alive through the exchange of letters.

Thereafter we had parted almost with a sense of finality. Jassi had written a few letters but I had decided against responding to them. The last letter came on the eve of her marriage. But somehow she hadn't thought it worth her while to extend even the customary invitation to me.

Then we had almost lost contact with each other. Perhaps the story of my foster-sister had put her wiser. Of course, there was no question of my wanting to keep any tabs on her. Whenever I would remember Jassi, her face with its broad clean forehead, innocent big eyes, sharp well-cut nose and crimson-red lips would swim before my eyes momentarily and then float away into a pool of serenity. Frankly, I never could get myself to roll into it with the recklessness of a stone and make a splash there.

The only time I got any news about Jassi after she had left was when I received that one and only letter from Raju which I had already read so many times over that I could almost repeat it backwards.

It was a sheer coincidence that Jassi had landed up in the same town where Raju lived. Her husband had been transferred there. Raju had written to me as soon as he got to know of it. Hardly a letter, it was more like an invitation. He had assured me that he would think of some way in which I could meet Jassi and that he would have it all worked out by the time I got there.

Raju's letter had quickened my heart-beat, this in spite of my best efforts to remain calm. For once I thought of giving in to my impulse that drove me toward Jassi. I could always meet her with minimum of fuss, making our encounter seem almost like a chance-meeting, something within had whispered. There was absolutely no harm in crossing over that Lakshman-rekha, just this once, the rekha drawn for me by none other than my own mind.

Now as I walk toward Raju's house, my heart is thumping all over again. I knock on the door rather hard. A middle-aged woman opens the door. She looks at me carefully before greeting me with a *Sat Sri Akal*. I return her greetings with a straight face, no trace of recognition in my eyes, and quietly follow her into the house.

Raju, it seems, has twisted his ankle. He is sitting up on the bed, his legs spread out and back, cushioned by a pillow, resting against the wall. One of his feet is swollen so badly that is looks like a dung-cake. He shakes hands with me, pressing my hand rather hard, smiles mysteriously and calls out, "Please bring some water."

Perhaps Bhabhi is not around. The same woman who had opened

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the door brings me a glass of water. She has a shock of grey hair, dark rings around her eyes, pale colourless lips, sagging breasts and a body reeking of a stale odour.

While handing over the glass of water she smiles her familiar smile which had greeted me a little while ago. I think to myself that I have seen this woman somewhere but I fail to figure out where.

"You don't seem to have recognised each other," interjects Raju, guessing my thoughts.

I don't reply to him, instead cast another glance in her direction. But it doesn't help.

She speaks up, "I have certainly recognised him, but it seems Veer hasn't."

Finally Raju solves the riddle for me, "She is Jagjit, my aunt's daughter. Don't you remember her?"

Seeing a blank expression in my eyes Raju starts laughing, "What if I say she is not Jagjit but Putli?"

Hearing this I stand up, almost as a reflex put my hand on her head to bless her and add in a rather plaintive tone, "You silly girl, why didn't you tell me you were Putli?"

As the name Putli sinks in, the image of a young vivacious girl flashes across my mind—long and dark tresses almost restless to touch the ground, spotless and glowing complexion, hazel-nut eyes shapely lips and a stout but nubile body.

Putli had stayed on with her maternal grandmother to do her B.Ed. Whenever I would visit Raju, everyone in the house would be calling out for her—'Putli! Putli!'—a name she had been given affectionately because of her genial, ready-to-please nature. All the members of the family used to call her Putli. Even Raju did. And so did I.

Bhabhi walks into the room and joins in the laughter I have helped provoke due to my inability to recognise Putli. Then she goes back into the kitchen to prepare meals and Putli close on her heels offers to help her serve us. She walks in and out of the room, bringing us chapattis or taking away the bowl of curry to reheat. Each time she walks into the room, I find myself staring at Jagjit—her shock of grey hair, dark rings around her eyes, pale colourless lips, sagging breasts and a body reeking of stale odour. The moment she goes out, Putli comes and stands in her place—long and dark tresses almost restless to touch the ground, spotless and glowing complexion, hazel-nut eyes, shapely lips and a stout but nubile body.

After we finish with our meals, Bhabi and Putli bring their *thalees* into the room and settle down to their lunch. We keep a steady stream of conversation going. As soon as they put down their *thalees,* I look

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at my watch and ask for their permission to leave.

Raju is rather surprised, "But how can you? No, you must stay on till tomorrow."

Bhabhi says, "Why this touch and go? We won't let you do it."

Putli adds her own bit, "Veer, at least stay on for a day more. Haven't we met after years?"

"I have to catch the two o'clock train," I declare in a matter-of-fact tone, "It is important for me to get back to the village today. I had got a letter, in fact. There is some dispute. Everyone must be waiting for me there."

Raju is quite obviously bewildered. He wants to say something but is deterred by the presence of both Bhabhi and Putli. His swollen foot would not even let him walk me to the door where he can get in a word edgeways. He just keeps repeating, "Well, how can you go!"

I reassure them, "We shall meet again. Today I just happened to be passing by. So I thought let me snatch an hour or two between this train and the next one."

I pick up my suit case, and with a *Sat Sri Akal* to Bhabi turn to leave. Raju makes yet another vain bid to get up from the bed. I cast a sad glance at Putli and walk out of the house. Once in the street, I signal to a rickshaw puller to stop and ask him to rush me to the station. □

Translated from Punjabi by Rana Nayar

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A SHORT NOVEL

A SORT OF REVENGE

Sunil Gangopadhyay

AVINASH has insulted me and I have sworn to make him bite the dust. The thought of revenge is enough to throw me into a spasm of feverish agitation. But it is important that I keep my cool and plan a decisive course of action. An impatient anger will only defeat my purpose. And in that case Avinash will remain the victor. It will be his victory rather than my vengeance.

I took up the morning paper to forget Avinash and my anger. But that hardly helped. For reading the newspaper made me want to teach the whole world a lesson. However, the thought of so much anger and vengeance appears somewhat ridiculous.

On a sudden impulse I yearned for a cup of coffee instead of my usual morning tea. There was a time when at this hour of the morning I would go over to Gauri's place for coffee. Watch out Gauri: you have no notion of the danger that is heading your way.

I went into the bath for a shave. The skin was rough and leathery. It happens in winter. My face turns dry and hard as soon as I apply soap. But today the shaving blade is at fault. It is several days old and the edge is blunt. I happen to be a little self-indulgent about blades. I could never bring myself to use any of those cheap brands. With a sigh I told myself that it was my own fault. The last two days I had completely forgotten that I was running short of blades. But what of now? I could hardly go out to the market for a blade with my face thickly lathered and half a cheek already shaven. On the other hand even a tiny stroke of the razor was acutely painful. I was almost in tears. Of course, the whole thing is my fault. But who can be angry at himself for long? Certainly not me; and so my anger and discomfort went bounding back to Avinash. As I stood before the mirror and thought of Avinash my face turned cruel and fearsome. My eyebrows were drawn in a frown, the left

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eye had narrowed menacingly and my teeth were bared in a vicious snarl. A ruthless killer looked at me from the mirror.

Suddenly I remembered my sister-in-law. She is sure to burst out laughing if she sees me making faces in front of the mirror the way kids do. Hurriedly I bolted the door and regained my stand before the glass. Avinash is there, right in front, and here I am, an authentic murderer. Lather still lies plastered on my cheeks but the murderer's face in the mirror is latherless and merciless. I grew a little frightened of my appearance. I had no idea that anger can make my eyes so very cold and vacant. Were I to confront Avinash with this face and these eyes ...

Some years ago I had picked up a *bhujali* in Darjeeling. It came to my mind now. The blade is long and curved, encased in a fine leather scabbard. At first I had hung it on a wall, then seeing the scabbard turn dusty I had put it away in a box. I have not used that *bhujali* so far.

Somehow I finished shaving, went into my room and brought out the *bhujali* from the box. The blade glistened as I drew it out of the scabbard; perhaps I had rubbed vaseline on it while putting it away. Even a glance reveals the lethal sharpness of the blade. A shiver ran down my spine as I touched the edge. It might be irritating if a shaving blade is not sharp but fingering a blade like this is by no means comfortable. It would have sufficed if the dagger was curved and glistening.

Now I am a wholly different man: my body quivering with humiliation and rage, a lethal dagger poised in my hand. When I bought the *bhujali* six or seven years ago, I had no particular purpose in mind. It had looked attractive in that fine leather scabbard and so without a thought I picked it up. Those days the sight of anything attractive was enough to make me want to have it. Like I wanted to have Gauri when I saw her. These hands have been through a great deal in their attempt to hold her.

Will I actually strike Avinash with the *bhujali*? I am not sure if I will go that far, though not for fear of getting caught. I have read several thousand detective stories and its the same in every case. The crime is perfect save for a little slip-up somewhere. And that tiny, almost negligible slip invariably leads to the discovery of the criminal. All I need to do is avoid that crucial error and then who will ever catch me. No, I am not worried about that. Besides I have read in the paper that of the four hundred and fifty odd murders in West Bengal last year, only a hundred and fifty odd were conclusively solved. Statistics too are on my side.

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The problem is of quite another nature. Supposing I was overwhelmed with remorse after killing Avinash. I can well imagine the situation. Tortured night and day by the pangs of remorse, every breath like a heavy sigh, that unbearable burden of an unshareable torment. Avinash will remain the victor. That remorse will be his revenge.

There is still another problem. Supposing Gauri arrived on the scene as I stood before Avinash with the dagger in an upraised arm. I am quite sure that seeing me in that stance she will laugh like it was some kind of damned good joke. Not only will she laugh, her whole body will be convulsed in one endless paroxysm of laughter and with flushed face and tears in eyes she will stand between my quarry and me and taunt, come kill me, brave guy, let's see how strong you are these days. Now, I am not at all sure how I would handle a situation like that. Meanwhile that scoundrel Avinash will grin at me. I can't even push Gauri aside and charge like a real pro because I have sworn never to touch her.

Perhaps I can remove her from the way with a jab of the *bhujali,* or hit her on the head with the blunt edge so that she will collapse in a faint. That won't be difficult either. One quick twist of the wrist and the blunt edge will strike her pretty skull. These hands will never touch you again, so I had once told Gauri. A simple thrust of the dagger will not break the vow.

The only thing that worries me is that Gauri's taunts and her merriment will continue to the very end. I hold nothing against her yet sometimes I am tempted to do her harm. I have no desire to hurt her physically but then I have no notion of the weapon which can injure her otherwise.

Gauri will not take me seriously if she finds me attacking Avinash with a knife because she is convinced I am a coward. She firmly believes that I will never do anything brave in my life. How can I show nerve and dash before someone who thinks I am downright yellow?

When I was a boy I used to be crazy about flying kites. Once I wanted to buy some and being quite broke I decided to lift a few coins from my uncle's jacket. I had done that a few times before and uncle hadn't noticed because he is an absent minded man. But that day he entered the room just as I had dipped a hand in the pocket. Seeing him there I stood where I was, frozen with fear. To my amazement uncle neither thrashed me nor did he shout. He just looked at me with his calm eyes and said in a grave voice, don't you do such a thing again. When you need money come and tell me.

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Uncle never spoke of the matter to anyone, he did not talk to me about it either. Twenty years have gone by since that day. I didn't pick pockets after that, nor did I grow up to become a burglar, a bank robber or a trafficker. Like others I too have grown up to be simple law-abiding man. Once I found a wallet on a double-decker bus, there were three hundred rupees inside and a card with the owner's name and address. Without a second thought I traced the owner, returned the wallet and earned the man's profuse gratitude. My uncle's son has grown into a spoilt brat and often takes a few rupees from me but despite all this, I feel like a sneak when my uncle looks at me and cannot return the gaze.

It is not as though I am really a hopeless coward, but as I said before, somehow Gauri is of the view that I am and will always remain a coward.

Take that occasion when Gauri's little sister Shanta was almost drowned. It was the winter of '54 and some of us went for a picnic to Barasat. Leaving the others behind, Gauri, I and the seven year old Shanta went walking far inside the park. There we sat on the bricklaid edge of a small pond. Gauri was in a bright yellow sari and an orange blouse (being rather fair Gauri likes playing around with loud colours), I was in corduroy pants and a sports shirt. While she picked thorns from her sari I sat chewing on a piece of coconut. Meanwhile Shanta was wandering gathering berries. Suddenly we heard and saw a commotion in the water and Shanta's flailing arms almost at the centre of the pond. For an instant we gaped at the sight, shocked and frightened; then grabbing me with both arms Gauri said in a strange, choked voice, do something, Sunilda. It took me no time to decide. With a jerk I shook myself free and sprinted towards the spot where our friends sat. And as I ran I hollered at the top of my voice: Avinash! Tapas! Kestoda! Girish!

We returned and found Gauri had already dived into the water. And by the time Kestoda went in, she had brought Shanta near the steps that rose from the water. After the crisis passed we sat and talked about it. Sure enough I wanted them to appreciate the presence of mind I had shown in running for help. But as I was speaking of my bit in the rescue, Gauri stopped me and said in a contemptuous tone, shut up hero, everyone knows you have nothing except a loud voice. The others looked at me and laughed and I felt as though I had been whipped across the face. I could hardly believe they were calling me a coward because I ran back for help. They know very well that I can't swim. And of what use would have been my bravado if I had jumped into the pond without knowing how to swim? It

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would only have endangered two lives without saving either. They might have blamed me for being unable to swim but to laugh and call me a coward because I did not thoughtlessly dive into the water ... I had run for help because that was the only sensible thing I could do in the circumstances. But they did not look at the matter the way I did. So they called me a coward and joked about it.

Sometime after that incident I secretly learned to swim. Now I am a fairly good swimmer and can easily cross and re-cross ponds of any size. Hard luck though, for since I learnt swimming I haven't come across the chance to save someone from drowning. It is no longer possible to walk with Gauri by the edge of a lonely pond. If that were possible, I would have surely shoved her into the water only to rescue her immediately. She might, in that case, revise her conviction about my cowardice.

Because Shanta did not drown and die that day Gauri did not hold a grudge against me for long. However, her conviction became unshakeable and permanent after another incident.

One evening Gauri and I were returning home on a double-decker bus after a concert at Raja Basanta Rai road. It must have been about ten when on an impulse we got down at the Esplanade. I wanted to spend some time with Gauri in the darkness of the Maidan.

Those days I was an easily excited and restless young man. And I had this curious belief that while making an intimate declaration to a woman it is necessary to smother her in a bear-hug. Not without reason though. For how can I enter a woman's heart unless I first press a hand on her breast? I had known Gauri long enough but so far I had not said anything particularly intimate. That evening there swelled within me a great urge to say something, anything intimate, though I hardly knew what. Therefore, I decided to take her in my arms. If for so long I have been unable to pour sweet words down her ears it was only because I had not cared to take her in my arms.

Gauri's face was roused and expectant. Her father had remained at the concert trusting me to see his daughter home and now here we were at the Maidan. What surprised me most was that Gauri agreed to get off the bus without a question. I had never before seen her so quiet and pliable. A new light shone in her eyes.

I remember that in those days privacy was beyond reach, even if you had a girl within reach. I must have been twenty two or twenty three and it seemed as though there was no place in the wide world where unobserved I could make love to a girl. Everywhere and at all times, the glare of a thousand prying eyes. We walked past Curzon

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Park and approached the Martyr's Monument. Four or five men loitered there. We walked some more distance, looking for some dark corner and then I suggested, how about going to the riverside? No, no, not that far. I'll be late getting back home, Gauri quickly objected. We turned around and took the Red road. Beneath the winter night the road lay dark and deserted. Not a soul anywhere except the two of us. I was a little uneasy. I had heard that the area is haunted by gangsters and hoodlums at night. We turned back again, then drawing Gauri by hand I took her towards the dark lawn of the Rampart ground. The road wasn't far from where we sat; we could see the traffic though no one could see us from there. I took Gauri's hand and held it in mine. My heart thumped away. She remained silent and still, as though waiting for what I had to give. I raised the captive hand and murmured 'Gauri' even as a soft breeze wafted through that utter darkness.

I have always known Gauri as a quick-witted, sharp-tongued and self-willed girl. As a matter of fact, I was forced to submit most of the time to her whims, likes and dislikes. But that evening she was quite unlike her usual self. When I murmured her name she raised her eyes and gazed at me helplessly. So I grabbed her with both arms and hugged her until she was heavy and heaving on my chest; Gauri remained wordless. She did not protest or push me away; on the contrary an unusual warmth seeped from her body into mine. We stood in that dark lawn, I was close up against Gauri, but somehow, I don't know how, I just couldn't remember any of the tender, intimate words I had planned to whisper in her ears. The only thought in my head was that since I had her in my arms I should press against her more and more and still more passionately. I realized that I needed to do some talking for I was as silent as Gauri but I could hardly tell her, Gauri I want to press harder against you. Besides, I wasn't sure if she wanted it as much as I did or was only feigning the whole thing so that she could joke about it later. Gauri has always contradicted whatever I said and laughed at whatever I did. Perhaps she enjoys seeing me flustered and confused. Naturally, I was amazed at the change that had come upon her. That was the first time I had got physically intimate with her and there was no protest, no display of a quick wit and sharp tongue. It was so unusual that I almost grew suspicious. There had to be a mystery somewhere.

Gauri heard the footsteps before I did. A man in white came striding out of the darkness. Quickly we disengaged and sat apart. The man called out, I'll blow the whistle if you run. We stood up and Gauri took my arm. Coming up close the man took a look, then

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sneered, was it fun? Then in a hard voice he ordered, make a move. We're going to the station. Who are you? I asked him. The man laughed perversely and pulled out a card. Holding the whistle clamped between his teeth he held a flashlight on the card. I had feared hoods and gangsters but here was an Inspector from Lalbazaar police station. By way of an explanation the man added, I've been on your trail for sometime now. Move, the patrol car is parked at the next corner.

In a strained voice I asked, why, what have we done? We'll tell you all that at the station, he replied shortly. You have been prowling around the Martyrs' Monument, Red road and now here. I suppose it was darkest here. Spend the night at the station lock-up and tomorrow we'll see about calling your family.

I went numb listening to his words. I couldn't believe the things he was saying. That we should be locked up at the police station while Gauri's father ran around desperately looking for us. And next morning everyone at the station will laugh at us and joke, perhaps the newspapers will write about it. And Gauri, she is so proud and sensitive, how on earth will she take all this? I glanced at Gauri and saw her standing with downcast eyes. I took the officer by hand and pleaded, please, let us go ... please .. we didn't realize that sitting here is illegal ... please. Shut up, the policeman snapped, and don't tell me you were sitting here holding a religious discourse. The city's gone to dogs these days. Come on, move. The man caught Gauri's arm suddenly. The sight of that ugly, hairy arm on Gauri's made my blood boil but I had a notion that you can't throw a punch at the law and get away with it. Besides, the man still had the whistle between his teeth. The whole thing was now getting beyond my control and honestly I was terribly ashamed at my own helplessness. I took out four rupees from my pocket—that was all I had—and said, take this and please let us go. I swear I'll always remain grateful. Otherwise, it is going to be a disaster. Please ...

The officer wasn't mollified by the offer. He sneered, just four? You aren't even wearing a watch. Hey, screwing around seems to have become cheap. You won't stop this until you get busted.

I don't know what came over Gauri. Suddenly she tore her hand away and hissed, leave my hand and talk. My, my, what spirit, the man leered at her.

Again I implored him humbly: please forgive us this once, we will never ... The policeman put his arms around Gauri and pulled her near. And she started screaming like she had gone mad. For a while they struggled and then the man grunted in pain and let go

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of her. Gauri had set her teeth into his arm and freed herself. Fearing the policeman's wrath I whined away: please forgive us ... please ... don't wreck our lives. Shut up, the man snapped at me.

Then something else happened. We heard a new sound. A patrol car braked to a stop on the road near us and three uniformed men jumped out. For a moment I thought this was the end of the road. If only Gauri hadn't screamed that way we might have fared better. Then to my utter astonishment I saw our policeman run away into the surrounding darkness. Immediately, it was all clear. Leaving Gauri behind I ran after the man, I had grabbed him by his shirt when suddenly he pushed me and I fell heavily on the ground. A piece of his shirt remained in my hand and by the time I rose he had vanished. When I returned there was a middle-aged inspector and two constables with Gauri. After listening to whatever we had to say the officer turned to one of his men and said, sounds like it was Rameshwar. He's started this trick again. When was he released? Last month, sir, the constable answered. We'll put that bastard in again, the officer muttered, then turning to us added, go home now and don't hang around this place at night. Lots of funny things go on here.

Believe me, we had no idea. Thank god, you arrived in time, really, I didn't suspect the man at all. I said all this very quickly and with obvious relief.

Never mind that. Now walk down this road and then turn right on the main road. You will get a bus from there. There's nothing to be afraid of anymore. And yes, let me have your names and addresses. We'll catch Rameshwar and when his case comes up we'll need you as witnesses. Without any hesitation I gave him a fictitious name and address. Gauri, however, gave her own name and address.

Soon we found Gauri's purse and my four rupees. The fake policeman had dropped them in his hurry. Only a few minutes ago a great disaster had stared us in the face and now it had all cleared away so easily. Silently we walked down the road. My pulse was still racing. By the time we drew near the museum I was calmer and with a light-hearted smile I laid an arm on her shoulders. With a little shrug Gauri threw off my arm. Perhaps she was still nervous and frightened. So I tried to take her hand. Quickly and with firmness Gauri rejected the advance and said, no! What's the matter, Gauri, I asked her. Don't touch me again, she cautioned. I stopped in my tracks and looked at her puzzled. I couldn't figure her out. Feebly I said, really it was such a dreadful situation. The way that man ... she didn't wait for me to finish: don't touch me ever again.

Why? I asked her.

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Because that man insulted me before your very eyes and you didn't lift a finger. Don't touch me again: Gauri repeated in a bitter voice. It was as if a poisoned arrow had struck me from behind while I was happily walking along the way. It was like death, those few seconds. In a low, feeble voice I said, so this is what you think of me? How could I know he wasn't a policeman? Did you want me to get into a scuffle with a policeman?

But Gauri wasn't interested in what I had to say. Enough, she said, let's go home now.

I grew restless with rage and despair: That Gauri should have arrived at such an unfair judgement! The man was by no means a hulk. I wouldn't have thought twice about hitting him. And if I had restrained myself it was only because I didn't want to see Gauri in greater trouble. The police lock-up, Gauri's father, newspapers, the sniggering neighbours and her status as the Secretary of the College Union. All these had made me prefer a minor humiliation to a major disaster. If I had grown servile before that fake policeman in the darkness of the night, it was only to save her from the more terrifying mortification that daylight could bring. You can persuade a policeman with please and cash but what good can a punch on the nose do? At that moment I wanted to shout at the top of my voice and demand a deity who can read minds and who at this juncture would step down and reveal to Gauri that her self-respect and well-being alone had been my deterrants. When that bastard laid his dirty hands on her, my blood had boiled in anger. But the next moment I had held myself back because I had realized that it was my thoughtless selfishness that sought violence. For to save her I had only to make myself more servile.

The rest of the way Gauri walked without uttering a word. Her face was set and hard, her eyes distant. I sat beside her on the bus nursing a sullen helpless rage. I had no desire to engage in any explanation. And gradually that sullen rage became a bitter sense of suffered injustice which remained with me for long. Since that evening I have been a proven coward in her estimation. And since that night I have felt no desire to see her. We have met now and then, accidentally and with others around, but somehow I have always avoided her eyes. Were I to stand before her after conquering the world Gauri would only laugh, and think I am playing the fool. Were I to slay before her eyes the greatest enemy of this earth, she would attribute the feat not to me but to some mechanical toy.

Anyway, I have nothing against her any more. No longer have I the desire to prove my valour to her. It does not matter who

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remained a coward and who rose to heroism in her final tally. I am no more in the contest; the news of winners and losers no longer excites my interest. Nor do I give a damn to her relation with Avinash, but how dare he insult me inside my house early in the morning! Why did he have to drive to my house in that huge car, showing-off before all my neighbours? And it was only his visit that had reminded me of Gauri and made this weekday morning so bitter. I have endured a great many humiliations over the years, now has come the time for vengeance. Again and again Avinash hovered before my mind's eye. I will not go to work today.

I took a quick shower and had a quicker breakfast. The morning wasn't cold, yet I wore a jacket and slipped the *bhujali* into an inner pocket. The jacket bulged a little on one side but not enough to arouse suspicion. Vengeance with a dagger seems somewhat coarse, but I have been a late-starter. Why did I have to wait until this morning to embark on this act of vengeance?

Whether or not I would really use the dagger, it felt good to have it around. A weapon concealed on one's person can add heaps of self-confidence. And very soon I had a proof of that. At a street-corner shop I stopped to buy a couple of cigarettes. There were other buyers before me but the shopkeeper served me first. On other days I had observed how the man would attend to other customers and keep me waiting for a pack of cigarettes. Perhaps my voice sounds different today. I got into the bus prepared for a showdown with the conductor. Often when I am about to get off the bus the fellow would ask me, do you have a ticket? I would nod in reply, yet he would rudely insist, where is it? Naturally that made me angry. So many people got off the bus unchecked but why was it that in my case alone he was so suspicious! I was ready today. I got up, bought a ticket and bided my time. Now and then, I slipped a hand under the jacket and stroked that lovely hilt. But nothing happened. When I was getting off the bus the conductor politely asked, Sir, what's the time? In a hard voice I answered, don't know.

The midday sun shone brightly on the Esplanade. After a few minutes I suddenly realized that a great change had come over me. I have come to this place several thousand times before—in anger, despair, fear and fun—but today I stand here, a cool and determined assailant. No one possibly noticed me as I stood leaning against a pillar but I felt I was surveying my surroundings from a height. My body felt light; every limb was free and spring-like. I caressed the *bhujali* over the jacket. No one knows I have never used it, and yet what exquisite pleasure! Strange that for so long I should have kept

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this wonderful thing so far from me. Aimlessly I roamed through the busy crowd and understood only weapons can teach obedience to the world. And it is enough to repeat the word 'vengeance' to oneself to find an enormous strength of purpose. It seemed to me as though at that moment I was standing in broad daylight in the middle of the busy street, raising the glistening dagger, shouting to the world, Watch out, here I come!

I shall meet Avinash at seven in the evening. It is still far away. I cannot hang around here all this while pretending to be a killer, for who knows, I might gradually get soft and lose my resolution. A couple of pretty faces passed my way and I wanted to go on looking at them. At such times I forgot all about Avinash. Besides I might bump into someone I know. In that case I might get dragged elsewhere. Also, I needed to phone my office. An important file lay waiting on my desk. I ought to have torn that file into shreds and thrown them into a gutter or may be, set it on fire. It does not matter if such files are destroyed but you cannot leave them lying around on your desk. Small change in hand, I strode towards a cafe to make a call.

Gajenbabu was on leave today. So there is no problem now. And when Monday comes we'll see about the file. Should Gajenbabu inquire about the file and my absence I'll curtly tell him I had been to the races. Then I'll see what he has to say. I am sure Gajenbabu has gone to the racecourse today. He does that every Saturday.

I had put down the receiver after making the call when I picked it up again. There is no way I can avoid calling Gauri. I clearly remembered her number though I haven't phoned her once during the last four or five years. I wonder how I manage to remember such little things? I haven't thought of her phone number in a long time and I have forgotten so many important numbers but Gauri's number was distinct in my memory! As I bent over to dial the number, the hilt of the *bhujali* almost slipped out of the jacket. Quickly I slipped it in before the man at the counter could see. After a few rings an unfamiliar female voice answered at the other end. No, she is not at home now, she is at college. May I know who is on the line?

That was Shanta. She must be a woman by now. I knew very well that Gauri would be at college at this time. Without answering Shanta's query I cut the line. It is possible that I won't get her at college either. Some days it happens that if you don't get your man on the phone the first time then you don't get him in all subsequent attempts. I am not sure if one is allowed to make several calls in a row from this cafe. The man at the counter looked at me curiously.

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I threw a one rupee note on the counter and said, charge three calls. Then I dialled Gauri's college number.

I was now a little nervous. It would have been easier if Gauri had been at home to take my call. May be she is taking a class, may be she is not anywhere near the phone. And if on hearing my name from some clerk or office boy she frowns and says, who? all right, tell him I am busy. Or supposing the clerk refuses to call her. But surely that can't happen. I am merely scaring myself silly. There is a *bhujali* inside my jacket and no one dare disobey my command. Gauri came on the line immediately and when I told her who I was she said in a pleasantly surprised voice, how come you thought of me after so long? Where are you now?

— Gauri I want to see you if you aren't too busy.
— Where are you now? How far? Of course I can come over.
— I am at a cafe in Chowringhee. I'll be in the cabin on the left as you enter. Can you make it in fifteen or twenty minutes.
— Yes I can. It's such a surprise, really ...

Actually there was no chance that Gauri would arrive when I made Avinash bite the dust. On the other hand I knew that without her around vengeance will remain incomplete. My excitement rose steadily with time. Everything was clear, there was no question of the least hesitation. After a long time I had a real weapon. But who knows, may be it is already too late.

Gauri's face has lost all its sharpness. It has almost become tender. The shadows of weariness about her eyes have made her more beautiful. Her figure has grown full and round. She entered the cafe and after a little pause came towards the cabin, lifted the curtain and stood appraising me with a smile :

— My god, what a man! After so many years!
— How have you been Gauri?
— Not too well. How about you?
— Why aren't you well?
— There was a time when I was dying and you never enquired. I had pleurisy. Went on for a year and now the chest pain is back.
— But I was told it wasn't anything serious.
— At first I thought I had TB. I wasn't sure of surviving it.
— No one dies of TB these days.
— That's what you think. I had a terrible pain on my back, so I had to lie on my tummy and that made me cry—dying is better than that. And then I have to live on stuff like milk, eggs, apples and meat without spices. I am very hungry, I want to eat a lot. You

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got enough money on you?
–Yes, plenty. Avinash called on me this morning and returned seventy rupees that he had borrowed I don't remember when.
–Does he remember such things? I hear he is making piles of money these days.
–What do you mean, 'I hear'? You ought to know. Don't you meet him?
–Yes, I do, but we won't talk of Avinash. Tell me about yourself. We've met after ages, do you realize that? You must be mad to have borne a grudge against me for so long.
–You see Gauri I was a little nervous about calling you today. Supposing you banged down the phone as soon as you heard my name. Supposing in a cold voice you were to ask me, yes, what do you want?
–Is that what you think of me?
–I didn't mean that way. I mean, me haven't met a long time and now there is no relation between us any more.
–'Relation' is such a funny word.
–I am serious Gauri. I haven't thought of you all these years and then all at once I call you on phone.
–Where did you pick this odious habit of telling a woman on her face that you have ceased to think of her. Can't you break it softly?
–But it is a fact that I didn't think of you even once. After I lost with you I turned elsewhere. And now that elsewhere is no less empty. It's as though I am running up a blind alley and I can't see anything in front or back of me.
–Don't talk rubbish. Tell me what made you call me.
–I called you because I became a different man this morning. Now I am looking for revenge.
–Revenge! and you want to take revenge on me! Gauri laughed aloud. I listened to that laugh carefully. Her laughter has lost its cutting edge. Was it because of her illness that Gauri and Avinash aren't married yet? This meeting, however, has not revived any of the old heartaches. Not even a trace of the desire and despair of those long gone days. Then, am I to suppose that I have really and truely ousted her from my heart? Perhaps it would have been more apt if I felt a twinge of something—be it resentment or lust. Was I mistaken all these days?

Slowly I replied, no, I am yet to decide on a reason for taking revenge on you. But I will have my revenge on a great many people. As for now, I will begin with Avinash.

–Avinash? Why him?
–He came to my house and insulted me.

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— How can Avinash insult you? I thought I alone could do that.
— Its not a joke Gauri. You are making it worse.
— Don't get me wrong. Come, tell me, what did he do?
— He came to offer me his charity. We were meeting after about a year and I knew the moment I saw him that Avinash has changed. He is rich and a scoundrel too. You can see that in his eyes. I knew this would happen the day he became a partner in his uncle's engineering firm. But never mind that. The important thing is that he came to throw his charity at me. He came with the offer of a job.
— Why should that be an insult?
— That's the point! He came and talked all sorts of nonsense. How he is not able to look up old friends because he is very busy. Then he asked me what I am doing these days. After that he straight away asked me if I was willing to accept a good offer. There is a Marwari company that supplies stone chips at Farraka Barrage and they need a reliable man at the site. Everyday they supply ten wagonloads of stone. At present the stone comes from a quarry at Dholbhumgarh in Bihar. In a few months they will move to the quarry at Bethunidhi. The company wants a manager who will liason with the railway and keep an eye on the supply. Avinash wants to give me this job. More than five hundred as salary and free lodgings. He even thinks the job will leave me time for writing.
— Doesn't sound bad at all. But why should it make you so angry?
— That's the point! Why? I agree it doesn't sound bad at all. It's better than what I do here. That is certain at any rate. Avinash is only trying to help me. You don't need to go seeking help from a good friend. A true friend will come to your help unasked. That's all very right. I can't object to all that. Besides, I have no desire to live in Calcutta any longer. I desperately want to leave this city. And I want more money than I have now. As I said I have no reason for objection. And yet I am angry because I believe I have been humiliated. Why?
— Nonsense. You are out of your mind. It's your ... I could actually throw at her quite a few answers to that all-important 'why'. Why should an engineer be so thick with a contractor's firm? Why was it that Avinash spoke of cash and not salary? I know these things go on all over the country. And why should I bother so long as I get my cut in time?
— I did not say anything to Avinash for some time. I was embarrassed and it occured to me that if after I took the job Avinash saw me in an expensive suit and praised my taste and the tailor's cut, he

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will also think to himself that I was wearing the suit because he had given me the job. Not that it matters much. But my first reaction to his offer was anger at Gajenbabu of my present office.

Gauri sat back and laughed again, what a funny name. Now what has he done?

—He hasn't made my job permanent yet. Had I been secure in this job I could have refused Avinash the first time. I would have told him that I am a clerk and I am not ashamed of being one. I am not envious of those above me. But a temporary job gets you nowhere. If anyone enquires about my work I am at once wary and embarrassed lest I should have to confess my temporary status. There is a thing called CR which Gajenbabu writes at the close of every year. And I have noticed a sly smile on his face when he writes about me in that report. Leave alone a promotion, he hasn't made me permanent or else I would have said no to Avinash right away. You will agree that it is more satisfying to refuse a favour than to accept one. And Gajen has deprived me of this satisfaction.

—Why do you want to be so complicated about a simple thing? Anyone would let a friend know of a good opening somewhere.

—Do you call this a good opening? To rot in a damned village and play foreman to a gang of labourers. But it is better than what I have here. And there is no reason to refuse the offer, at least not logically. But let me answer one of my 'whys'. Didn't you find something odd about the proposal. As though the place had been tailor-made to suit me. It is not as though I mistrust Avinash—but let me begin at the beginning. Why did Avinash visit me this morning? Can you answer that? Why did he not telephone me? Besides we are no longer the friends we once were and he knows this as well as I do. Then why such solicitude? A man who is so busy and earns so much money cannot be expected to call a little nobody like me on a weekday morning. And then he comes with the excuse of returning the money he had borrowed years ago. All this implies that he has been thinking of me for some days and that includes searching a job for me. Why?

—Why?

—Because Avinash wants me out of Calcutta. I am certain about that Gauri. For some reason he doesn't want me around here any more. And since we haven't kept in touch for so long it's a little difficult figuring out his motive. But I know he wants me away. I can clearly see it. And that is why I feel insulted and humiliated. I am also aware that to refuse this offer I need a very convincing argument.

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And because I could not think of one this morning I was angry at Avinash, Gajen and all the contractors and engineering firms of the world. It's true that I sat meekly while Avinash talked, but my anger was flaming all over the room.

— Niluda, I think you are out of your mind. You seem normal but there is a kind of madness in whatever you are saying. A mad logic.

— You are absolutely wrong. Actually there is no logic in whatever I have said. I realized today that logic is nothing but cowardice, and in our lives courage is necessarily irrational. I have tried to be reasonable all these days and everyone I know has left me far behind. I have been courteous, humble and civilized believing that others would do the same to me but I have heard them laugh racuously and walk ahead with muddied steps. I have failed to keep pace with the world and here I am full of a vague unease at thirty-two, a few white hairs already on my head, and some evenings, hanging around a street corner I find I have really no place to go to and nothing to do. I can't go on like this, I think I am slipping underground ... And so this morning I arrived at a decision. Now it's my turn. Vengeance is mine and I'll begin with Avinash.

Gauri leaned over the table, took my hand and asked, how do you propose to take your revenge on him?

— I smiled at her, I don't know yet. But Gauri, are you holding my hand because you are afraid I might hurt him?

— Can't I touch you anyway?

— Have you forgotten your vow?

— You are still a kid. Don't tell me you haven't got over that. But Niluda, your face has grown so haggard and your eyes are burning, aren't they. You look very tired, you have changed a lot.

—Why shouldn't I have changed? There was a time when I thought nothing of a crook like Avinash and today he is a big man, full of hot air and throwing around his weight.

— You shouldn't say such things about Avinash to me. Doesn't suit you doing that. And you know I'll be marrying him next month.

— You too have changed a lot, Gauri.

— Yes, a great deal, you are right. Now I know that for the rest of my days I cannot afford to stand under rain for fun, I must eat in time, I can't have tea as often as I want ... I had a relapse once, I cannot walk out on a moonlight night anymore.

— And you can't dive into a pond.

Gauri looked at me quizzically, as though she was trying to recollect

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something. Perhaps she remembered nothing. Why should I have to bear alone this burden of remembering everything? Her pretty face seemed to go pale and defenceless, still holding onto my hand she said slowly, I am resigned to these things and they are the reasons for living. If I neglect one of them, I'll be bedridden and alone in any empty room. And if then someone were to sit at the bedside and speak of love I shouldn't enjoy it at all. Sitting on this chair is bad enough. I have a back ache already.

–Did you think of me all these days?

–Why shouldn't I? But don't get the idea that I thought of you tearfully, with a heaving heart. I would simply think of you. And now and then it seemed to me that somehow I had wronged you. As if I had given you what you never deserved.

–No, no, please don't think that way. I have never looked at it in that way. At first I thought of you all the time. Then, slowly, I forgot you altogether. And now there is neither anger nor sorrow.

–Won't you take revenge on me?

–Why should I? What good will it do? Besides, I can see that you have already lost out on life.

–Perhaps you imagine you can have your revenge on me by harming Avinash. He is my only support but I am not so weak that I will beg you to spare him and forget all this. I'll have nothing to do with the foolishness of you men.

–I'll be seeing Avinash at seven. Do you want to join us?

–Where will you meet him?

–Park Street.

–No, I am already tired. I think I'll go home. If you do manage to have your revenge on Avinash, don't bother to call me again. I will not be the object of a gamble. Isn't that what you suggested when you said that Avinash wants you out of Calcutta? But as a matter of fact I am not in love with you at all.

–Why do you want to spell it out? Don't I know that anyway?

We came out of the cafe. It had grown dark a long time ago. Gauri held out the palm of her right hand, look, how I sweat these days.

I took that hand in mine. It was soft, too soft and there was none of the warmth that I had once known. My fingers were yellow with nicotine and when I held up her white hand, it occured to me that these hands belonged not to us but to another man and another woman. Or did they appear different because of the neon street lamp?

We walked together to the bus stop. A rough looking guy brushed

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against Gauri as he walked past. Gauri didn't seem to notice but I laid a hand on the *bhujali* quite spontaneously. A little way ahead I caught up with the Romeo and stamped hard on his toe with my boot. He didn't stop for a second. Just took a look, murmured 'excuse me' and scurried away.

Buses are terribly crowded at this time. How will she even get into one? Perhaps I ought to see her home. But why should I bother? A fairly empty ladies' bus appeared. After the bus started Gauri looked at me from a window, a sad smile on her weary face. I turned back. It was almost seven. I decided to walk to Park Street. The road was busy and noisy but I could clearly hear each of my footsteps as my boots fell on the pavement. There was no great hurry, after a long time I was happy and with a light heart I reached Park Street. Avinash hadn't shown up yet.

I don't know how long I stood there waiting. Certainly not less than an hour. I knew he wouldn't stand me up. The glow of a street lamp fell on the statue of the Mahatma. When the traffic light went red at the intersection it looked as if Gandhiji's upraised arm had brought the endless line of cars to a halt. The cars and buses could by no means disregard his command and stood there fuming, grumbling and waiting for the moment when with a wave of the hand he would make the red green. I quite enjoyed watching the recurring pattern. Inside the cars intimate couples quickly sat apart, no one spoke a word and I waited with anxiety for the moment when he would signal with a flick of a finger. There goes the finger and the Mahatma says, go!

I had spent a long time watching this spectacle when Avinash arrived wearing a light suit. The knot of his necktie was awry and his hair tousled. He walked up to me and grinned, Hey—still waiting are you? I thought you would have left by now. Ah—but a job is a job, isn't it? So you accept the offer.

It was clear that Avinash has had a good many drinks. He was straight on his feet but his voice was far too loud. With his left hand Avinash tried to arrange his hair, I looked at him with narrowed eyes and said, let's cross the street, we'll sit in the park over there.

— Why park? Let's go to some cafe.
— No. I've been in a cafe all afternoon. With Gauri.
— With Gauri? Why? O.K. Never mind. So you met Gauri. Isn't that what you said? Why did you meet her?
— What does 'why' mean? We met—that's it. Let's go to the park.
— What will we do there?
— You were the one to call me here, Avinash.

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—But I never said we'd go to a park and graze.
—We won't get very far if you talk this way.
—Come off it. I didn't say anything. Fine, let's go to your park.

I took his arm while crossing the street. Suddenly Avinash shouted, let go my hand. You think I can't walk straight. A few drinks do nothing to a man like me. I had planned to take you along to a bar but I got stuck. There are lots of these guys these days who want to take me out for drinks. All punters and with loads of cash. You understand? Are you taking the job then?

Walking around the statue of the Mahatma, we went by the edge of the lake and entered the darkness on the other side. I said to Avinash, come we'll sit here and talk. Avinash stood stiffly and said, I don't have that kind of time. I have to get back to where I came from. Isn't it enough that I have kept my appointment with you. You had better take that job and later I'll see that you get an independent contract. Get into this line once and see the kind of money you make. Come along now, I'll take you to the man.

Now, I don't like talking to drunks when I am not drunk. They talk such utter rot that I can't think of any answer. So with a little heat I said, shut up Avinash and sit down. But he just glared at me and replied with equal heat who the hell do you think you are? You think you can talk like that just because we're friends. I'll knock the daylights out of you, you hear me. I still have enough strength in my arms, so don't waste time.

—Why are you so keen to let me have this job?
—Keen? What do you mean? There are thousands who are waiting to be called ... it's just because I am fond of you ... and you can't be making much here. Take it and I'll make a man of you yet.
—Avinash, will you or won't you stop talking this way?
—There you go again. That's why I could never like you. I don't like you at all. No gratitude at all. Tell me, did you just happen to meet Gauri, or what? Just happened to meet, eh? Suddenly, eh ... and I convinced that bastard Laxman Prasad about you and came here and now you son of a bitch!
—Avinash! how dare you talk to me like this!
—Dare? Who the hell are you that I should have to dare? You are a ... what shall I say ... a ... and you talk of daring.

A bloated and hung look appeared on his face. He looked more drunk than ever. If Avinash has had too many drinks then for the next hour or so he'll be getting more and more drunk. I raised his face with a hand and asked, what happened? What do

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you really want?
— What can I want? I only wanted you to take this job.
— Because you heard that Gauri and I have met.
— Shut up.

Before I knew what was happening, Avinash had punched my nose. It was a hard punch. I felt my nose and it was wet; may be I was bleeding. I took out a handkerchief and wiped my nose. I couldn't of course see any blood in the darkness. The punch had thrown Avinash off balance and now he lay sprawled on the grass. I imagined him lying there face down and the hilt of the *bhujali* stuck out between his shoulder blades. I knelt beside him, shook that immobile form and called him by name. His eyes flickered open; then in a pathetic voice he wailed, did I hit you Sunil? Tell me, did I? Believe me I tried so hard ... I wanted you to ... I really did, honest ... and I hit you?

— Why do you want me out of Calcutta?
— Out of Calcutta? How does it matter if you are outside or inside? You could be anywhere for all I care ... I was only thinking of the money ... there are so many jobless guys going around.
— Was it because of Gauri that you came to me?
— Gauri?

Avinash sat up clumsily and with evident agitation. He clutched my arm and said in a desperate voice, Gauri? You are right, I didn't think of this so long. That's the reason I was looking for you. How could I forget? Tell me, why did you call Gauri—I mean what reason did you give her? I suppose you meet her pretty often, don't you?

— We met today after three years.
— I don't believe you. Weren't you crazy about Gauri?
— Never! Once I tried to fall in love with her and now I have no desire to try again. So don't get the idea I'm a rival.
— Rival? No that's not it. You don't know how scared I am these days.

Avinash brought out his handkerchief, blew his nose and fought the drunken haze. With his hands he grabbed clumps of hair and pulled up his head until it was level with the sky. Tonelessly Avinash continued, you can't imagine how scared I am that Gauri will find out I don't love her at all. I mean it: I don't want her at all. And it would be so good if you loved each other. You could save me that way. I don't want to marry, believe me I don't.

— Aren't you marrying her next month?
— I don't know who I'll marry. May be Shanta.

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—Shanta!
—You don't know anything. Just imagine one day I kissed Shanta ... God ... she is something, I tell you, turned me on like nobody has so far. Its' nonsense to say I want this Gauri—sheer nonsense. But Shanta is another deal, you hear me.

Avinash went on muttering to himself. I sat by his side, cold and suddenly drained. Once upon a time Shanta had almost drowned in a pond and now try as I might I could only see that face of Shanta—the face of a helpless, drowning child. Who knows how big she's grown now. I also thought of Gauri's face as we walked to the bus stop. It was a calm and weary face and all sharpness seemed to have vanished. And Gauri's back aches if she even sits on a chair.

Avinash interrupted me, tell me a way I can dump Gauri and get Shanta. I took her once in my arms and you need to see to believe how we fit into each other. She snuggled against me and it was like a round peg in a round hole. Our bodies fit real well. The trouble is only with Gauri. You have no idea of the trouble I'm in ... its' likely that Shanta will drop me if I drop Gauri ... maybe later ... but she'll think I have injured her sister ... Why doesn't Gauri die? Or she might begin to like someone.

—Why are you telling me all this? You think I'm going to help you?
—Believe me, I can't do without your help. I'll be your slave forever. I'll do anything ... I'll lick your boots. I was at my wit's end and then I thought of you. Come on, I know you loved Gauri. May be I shouldn't hurt you talking about it ... you are such a fine guy anyway.

I could no long bear Avinash near me. I didn't even want to look at him. His breath stank and he spat whenever his words slurred. He was blowing his nose between his fingers and he would touch me with those fingers. I had a sudden urge to throw up. I shoved him hard and almost shouted, get lost and don't try to reach me again.

—Believe me, I'll die if I can't have Shanta ... I have money, lots of it and I go for these big all-night parties and if I had Shanta with me all the fat cats will be stumped. I get dizzy when I see Shanta, you have no idea and instead of her I'm stuck and doomed with Gauri. She'll mean the end of my career and anyway who wants the love of a worm-eaten woman.

I stood up and began walking away. Avinash called out, Hey! Where are you off to? Get me a taxi, please ... don't leave me ... hold me, I can't get up.

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I returned through the darkness. He lay on the ground like a heap of garbage. For a while I just stood looking at him. Now and then he spoke out in a voice that was almost a shout. A peanut seller came looking our way. I took Avinash by an arm and hauled him up. He moaned, I hurt my arm when I fell ... see if its broken ... give it a little massage.

But I didn't want to touch him. It's all right, I said, now get going. Avinash went on whining, I've hurt my wrist real bad. Ouch! why don't you wash it with some cold water. Did I hurt you too?

I didn't bother to answer. With my eyes on the red neons of the billboards I walked to the road and found a taxi. Before climbing in he said, why don't you join me?

— No.
— Come along and we'll visit Gauri together.
— No and don't try to see me again.
— Don't talk rot. I will see you again. Come along now, we'll go together ...
— No. I pushed him into the taxi. After it drove away I felt a lot easier. His monotonous whining had filled my ears for so long that now the silence was a cool sensation. I stood leaning against the iron guardrail around the lake. A few people strolled about. I hadn't noticed how pleasant the night was—not very cold and all over the park dappled moonlight. It would be nice to spend some time here alone. Its' guys like Avinash who come and destroy the pleasures of solitude. Simply wonderful to stand alone by the calm moonlit water! At such times you just can't think of anything else; its' like being in love with yourself.

I was feeling a little heavy around the chest. But that is only because I have been carrying the *bhujali* a long time. I am not used to carrying a wallet or a pocket notebook and here I was with a heavy weapon inside my jacket. I had a wish to dump the *bhujali* in the lake. It won't make any noise as it drops on the water and sinks. But I am not sure if it will sink with the scabbard. But whether it sinks or stays afloat it makes no sense to throw away something I had once bought with great pleasure. Perhaps I will again hang it from a wall.

Can't be helped. I had simply no desire to touch Avinash. May be I'll start looking all over again, for someone on whom I can take revenge. □

Translated from Bengali by Gautam Chakravarty

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PLAY

COME, TEACH ME DRIVING

Sajida Zaidi

Characters : Husband and wife.
Young, good looking, smart, educated, both Indians.
Place : A night in London, fairly dark. A modest sized room, one of the many big and small rooms in a six storey building, with a kitchenette opening into the room, known as Dick in common parlance; ordinary furniture with no special features to talk about. A few chairs, a sofa-bed, a side-table with a tape recorder, a record player etc resting on it. A bookshelf in a corner, mostly displaying paperbacks with a small assortment of other books. A Picasso print on the front wall and a small original painting by an unknown painter hanging by its side. A lamp standing by the side of a chair. A writing table by the side of a door on the right opening into a common gallery. A few books and an open file resting in disorder on the table. A curtain hanging near the sofa-bed suggests that at night the curtain is drawn in, converting the drawing room into a bedroom.
Time : Eight in the evening. A Sunday.

Wife : (putting the book on the table, backside up). Come, teach me driving.
Husband : (without raising his eyes from the newspaper). No.
Wife : Why not?
Husband : Because yesterday you again committed the same mistake.
Wife : I? I didn't commit any mistake. But tell me which mistake?
Husband : (Throwing the newspaper on the chair, as if ready for a fight) The one at which I had shouted at you.
Wife : But you shout at everything.
Husband : Do I shout or you?
Wife : You!
Husband : No, you!

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Wife : You and you alone!
Husband : No, you, you, you!
Wife : Why are you so thick-skinned?
Husband : Living with you even a buffalo would become thick-skinned.
Wife : It's for the first time in your life that you have spoken the truth.
Husband : That you can make everybody thick-skinned?
Wife : That there is no difference between you and a buffalo.
Husband : There, you are again provoking me to quibble with you.
Wife : Even a buffalo like you?
Husband : You'r yourself a buffalo.
Wife : But only a moment ago you had said 'I'm a buffalo.'
Husband : No, I never said that.
Wife : Of course, you said that.
Husband : No, I hadn't.
Wife : Of course, you had said just that.
Husband : I say I didn't.
Wife : But it had meant just that.
Husband : All right, keep quiet and go back to your book.
Wife : When you find yourself at a dead end you always change the topic.
Husband : Yes, just to bury the hatchet.
Wife : No, because your mind cannot work beyond a certain limit.
Husband : Living with you there is no need to use the brain.
Wife : Even if there was need for it you wouldn't have been able to put your brain to work. (Pause) You are a man with a very limited brain.
Husband : The same applies to you also. You have a very limited brain and an equally limited imagination.
Wife : A rotten way of arguing indeed.
Husband : What?
Wife : That one should hurl back the same arguments at the adversary.
Husband : You call your imbecile talk arguments?
Wife : Any talk based on logic passes for an argument.
Husband : But every argument has some quality about it.
Wife : Logic has nothing to do with quality.
Husband : Yes, it has something to do with quality.
Wife : Then prove it.
Husband : Rather you prove that it has nothing to do with quality.

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Wife : It's for you to prove it. You had started the game.
Husband : But who brought in this damned quality first? I or you?
Wife : The subject under discussion is quality and not argument.
Husband : It's about the quality of argument.
Wife : As if it makes any difference.
Husband : Of course, it does make a difference.
Wife : Then spell out the difference.
Husband : Am I there to tell you everything? You tell me. Better stop it. There's no point in arguing with you. It leads one nowhere.
Wife : Is it that we cannot take things to their logical conclusion because you lack the ability to do so?
Husband : It bogs down midway.
Wife : Because you snuff it out midway.
Husband : It just peters out.
Wife : I've already told you you've a shoddy mind and are lacking in imagination.
Husband : That's precisely what I had said about you.
Wife : Why can't you say something original?
Husband : You are totally lacking in originality to be able to assimilate something new.
Wife : It has nothing to do with my originality but with yours.
Husband : No, with yours.
Wife : No, with yours.
Husband : No, with yours.
Wife : You're just putting forward excuses so that you don't have to teach me driving.
Husband : I have told you once that I can't teach you driving.
Wife : But why can't you teach me driving?
Husband : Because you commit to many mistakes.
Wife : For instance? Name one mistake.
Husband : Once you ... er once you ... But why do you want me to cite an instance every time? I've told you once for all that you make too many mistakes.
Wife : Give me one concrete instance.
Husband : Your each and every mistake is concrete. I could name it if there were just one.
Wife : I'm talking of a solid concrete instance. Not of a concrete mistake.
Husband : I find no difference between the two.
Wife : Yes, there is a basic difference. But things like these are beyond your comprehension.

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Husband : Why do you always go hammer and tongs after my intelligence?

Wife : How can I go hammer and tongs after something which just does not exist?

Husband : That's the most surprising part of it—that you still question my intelligence.

Wife : (jumping with joy) So you have blurted out the second truth—that you don't have something called intelligence. You have just accepted that fact.

Husband : I've never said that.

Wife : Yes, you've said it.

Husband : When?

Wife : Just now. When you said something about hammer and tongs.

Husband : You are not only a quibbler but also a half-wit. The reference was to the attack and not to my intelligence.

Wife : The reference was to the attack on your intelligence which is non-existent.

Husband : (gritting his teeth) I was alluding to your other attack.

Wife : How can you bring in another attack when you are alluding to the first one?

Husband : Yes, I can do it by means. Because I don't have a closed mind like yours. I produce one idea out of another idea. Yes, I'm capable of it.

Wife : You have never produced one idea out of another. None that I know of.

Husband : I've always done that.

Wife : No, never.

Husband : If I've not done it, it's because you always hamstring my efforts.

Wife : But just now you were saying that you have always done it.

Husband : Uff! It's no use talking to you. It's futile, downright futile. You attend to your work I'll attend to mine.

Wife : What work are you talking of? You only vegetate after coming from office.

Husband : Who vegetates? You or I?

Wife : I never vegetate.

Husband : You are good for nothing except vegetating.

Wife : And you too. You have nothing else to do except vegetating.

Husband : All right, let's call a truce. Let us join hands and vegetate together.

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Wife : I can't vegetate. I must learn driving.
Husband : I don't want to instruct you. Because yesterday you had repeated the same mistake again.
Wife : What mistake? Why don't you blurt out?
Husband : (jumping up excitedly). Yes, now I remember you were going to turn to the right while you gave the left signal.
Wife : I gave the signal to the right.
Husband : I remember it correctly. It was the left signal.
Wife : Right.
Husband : No, left.
Wife : No, right.
Husband : No, left.
Wife : Then I must have been taking a turn to my left.
Husband : You were definitely turning to your right.
Wife : I was turning to my left.
Husband : You were turning to your right.
Wife : To my left.
Husband : To your right.
Wife : When I was turning to my left I had pressed the right indicator so that ...
Husband : Again, saying something wrong, aren't you? You were in fact turning to your right and you had pressed the left indicator.
Wife : It comes to the same thing.
Husband : No, it's not the same thing. Pressing the right indicator and turning left and pressing the left indicator and turning right are two different things.
Wife : No, they are exactly the same.
Husband : There's a basic difference between the two.
Wife : On principle there is no difference between the two.
Husband : But in reality there is a difference between the two.
Wife : Why can't one do something on principle?
Husband : Here we are dealing with a specific case.
Wife : When one is not clear on the fundamentals how can one assess a particular situation with any degree of correctness?
Husband : I'm not assessing a situation. I'm expressing my views on the situation.
Wife : One can't express one's views without assessing the situation. It is one of the rudiments of Depth Psychology.
Husband : Who is talking of Depth Psychology?
Wife : Then what are we talking of?

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Husband : We are talking of Phenomenology.

Wife : Phenomenology does not mean that one should state the happening to the letter.

Husband : Phenomenology does not mean what you have in your mind.

Wife : But I haven't told you what I mean by it, have I?

Husband : Whatever ideas you have formed about it they are nevertheless patently wrong.

Wife : You have such a confused mind that you would do well not to dabble in Philosophy and Logic. You should steer clear of them. You should confine yourself only to reading newspapers.

Husband : Women are themselves so muddle-headed. They are just not capable of thinking clearly. It is beyond them.

Wife : How feudal you are! Always making a comparison between men and women to the latter's disadvantage, when it has been categorically proved that there is no difference between the male and the female on the basis of sex.

Husband : When was it proved? Who proved it?

Wife : The British and American books on Experimental Psychology are crammed full with these facts. If only you had read them.

Husband : These books are strewn with graphs and sketches. They don't have anything else. As for men, they don't touch him even with a barge pole. Man simply does not exist for them.

Wife : Your Liliputian mind is too small to know anything about man's existence. So why talk of man?

Husband : You seem to be woefully ignorant of Eastern Philosophy. Our wisemen have truly maintained that women are deficient in intelligence and therefore one should take no notice of what they say.

Wife : Here is no more proof of your feudal outlook, if one was still needed.

Husband : But only yesterday you were telling me that I'm pseudo modern.

Wife : When did I say that? You are talking sacrilege.

Husband : You have become very forgetful. You had better go in for the treatment of your memory.

Wife : A woman whose fate is aligned with a man of your ilk should mercifuly be endowed with forgetfulness. I will not have my brain treated for lapse of memory.

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Husband : So you want to perpetuate your dullness of mind? I had a hunch that you will never submit your self for this kind of mental treatment.

Wife : You know nothing about my mind because I've a very complex personality. And as for yourself, you suffer from simple-mindedness. You are so naive.

Husband : I know everything about you. I know you inside out.

Wife : Then out with it. Tell me what do you know about me?

Husband : That you will not have your brain treated.

Wife : Then I *must* have my brain treated.

Husband : Then go ahead. Get yourself treated so that you may be able to recall that yesterday you had called me pseudo-modern and today you are calling me feudal. You are yourself in the habit of contradicting yourself.

Wife : I feel like shedding tears over your crass ignorance. You don't even know such a simple thing that pseudo-modernism and feudalism go hand in hand.

Husband : You mean like you and me even though our paths lie wide apart?

Wife : Well, tell me what should have made me to label you a pseudo-modern, which by the way you actually are.

Husband : After seeing a Matisse art exhibition when I had tried to assess him against Von Gough and had said ...

Wife : Forget it. You had made no assessment. You had only made some comments and had said ...

Husband : I had made elaborate comments only later on. First I had made an assessment of ...

Wife : It wasn't a full-fledged review. Only an unsuccessful attempt at an aenemic review. You had said ...

Husband : It is beyond you to understand the difference between a review and a comment.

Wife : It was I who had first told you the difference between a review and a comment when you tried to pass your measly comment for a full-fledged review.

Husband : I had used the term full-fledged for the review and not the comment. Oh, how you murder language!

Wife : And you murder thoughts.

Husband : Who murders thought? You or I?

Wife : You.

Husband : You. First I had examined the basic elements of art. And you dubb it as review. If it is not murdering thought what else is it?

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Wife : So far as art and literature are concerned I regard you as a complete ignorance in relation to them—a big cypher! It hardly makes any difference to me.

Husband : How am I concerned with what you think about it?

Wife : But it makes a vital difference to me.

Husband : In what way?

Wife : That you have been whining before me to let you know the difference between your silly review and assessment. While I know and you know that you are completely lacking in artistic sensibility.

Husband : If I am lacking in artistic sensibility why do I attend art exhibitions, poetic symposiums and plays? Not only that, why do I write such perceptive reviews on them?

Wife : You go there out of some vague egotistical impulse.

Husband : And you? Why do you go there?

Wife : Art and literature are my inborn traits. I visit these places for mental satisfaction.

Husband : Wrong. Absolutely wrong. You go there so that the artists and the poets and the writers and the producers should say a nice word about your looks and your sari. And that you should feel elated taking these empty words as flirtation on their part.

Wife : I don't indulge in make-believe. They really try to flirt with me.

Husband : They don't flirt with you. Far from it. They act in this manner just to feed their own ego.

Wife : They go all out to flirt with me. Hundred per cent. But you turn a blind eye to all this.

Husband : What makes you think that I turn a blind eye to these goings-on?

Wife : Out jealousy. Sheer jealousy.

Husband : When you are not jealous of my intelligence why should I be jealous of your good looks?

Wife : Why should I be jealous of your intelligence when you and intelligence are poles apart?

Husband : And why should I be jealous of your looks when your features are so bland?

Wife : Before our marriage, when you were indulging in that pedestrian type of romance with me why did you profess to me that I was the most beautiful woman in the world?

Husband : And before marriage, when you were trying to entice me why did you proclaim that you were proud of my intelligence?

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Wife : I had said that just to satisfy your vanity. I'm so sensitive that at the very first sight I had discerned that you are very vain.

Husband : And I am so intelligent that on the very second day of our meeting I had realised that you were nothing but a run-of-the-mill type of woman. I knew that I had only to describe your beauty and slanting eyes as the eyes of a doe and you would pat fall into my lap.

Wife : I don't have slanting eyes. I only use *kajal* in such a way that they look slanting.

Husband : You mean you take pleasure in making your eyes uglier still?

Wife : You are completely out-of-date. You don't even know that these days it's in vogue to have slanting eyes.

Husband : Fashion in eyes? How funny indeed! These days do they have fashion of a kind in eyes and nose

Wife : Of course, there's fashion in everything—the colour of the hair, the colour of eyelids and the colour of forehead mark.

Husband : Oh, my God!

Wife : And all these colours are matched together. And sometimes they are worn in contrast.

Husband : Oh, holy Almighty, where are You?

Wife : The contrast is there to heighten the effect. The contrast between the border and the body of the sari should be made in such a way that the colour of the forehead *bindi* and the colour of the eyes and the hair should match the colour of the body of the sari.

Husband : What nonsense are you talking?

Wife : One is also free to adopt a different colour scheme. For instance, one could have a matching colour for the sari and the *bindi* and a different colour for the hair, the eyes and the border of the sari. It depends

Husband : Stop this gymnastic of words. It makes my head reel. Oh yes, what depends on what?

Wife : Everything depends on everything.

Husband : But what thing depends on what thing? Hadn't you said a moment ago that it depends?

Wife : These are matters of finer taste. One can't reduce these things to a formula.

Husband : Why can't one reduce them to a formula?

Wife : I've told you, one can't evolve formulas for them. In mat-

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ters of taste the question of individual preferences assumes paramount importance.

Husband : And who sets all these fashions?

Wife : Model girls and actresses.

Husband : Why can't you people be original in anything? Just copy cats!

Wife : Because imitation is originality's starting point. And today's world has greatly narrowed down. More or less the same fashions prevail in Paris, London, New York, Delhi, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Karachi. All at the same time.

Husband : You mean fashions of the same kind and at the same time?

Wife : The basic trend is the same. There is only a difference of details.

Husband : But why? It sounds so stupid.

Wife : International unity.

(Silence)

Husband : (Looking defeated, picks up his newspaper.)

Wife : (Looking bored, picks up her book)

(A short pause)

Husband : (His eyes fixed on the newspaper) My head is reeling. Get me a cup of tea or coffee. Anything.

Wife : (Her eyes fixed on the book) Why can't you make it yourself?

Husband : (His eyes still fixed on the newspaper) I'm feeling so tired.

Wife : (Her eyes still fixed on the book) I'm also feeling so tired.

Husband : (Pushing away the newspaper) I made it yesterday. You make it today.

Wife : (Closing the book) I made it the day before.

Husband : And I made it on the day previous to that.

Wife : And previous to that I had made it on two consequitive days.

Husband : You had made it on those two consequitive days because you were sitting close to me.

Wife : Certainly not. I was not sitting close to you.

Husband : Not near me. Near the kitchen. It was less of an exertion for you to move into the kitchen.

Wife : Today you are sitting near the kitchen. So it's your turn to make the tea.

Husband : Both of us are equi-distance from the kitchen. You can measure it if you like.

Wife : All right, let's measure the distance.

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Wife

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Husband : You had said it first.

Wife : No, you had said it first. So you must make the measurement.

Husband : All right, all right, I'll measure it. But tomorrow you'll have to make the measurements.

Wife : If you make the tea I'll do the measurements and vice versa. That is, if I make the tea you'll do the measurements.

Husband : This is transparent fraud. The one who is nearer the kitchen will make the tea. And one who does not measure the distance today will measure it tomorrow.

Wife : This is crass injustice. A vile attack on woman's rights.

Husband : I can measure the distance today on condition that you do it tomorrow. Speak out. Do you accept my condition? If you accept I'll measure the distance. Otherwise not. Not at any cost.

Wife : You are boring me for nothing.

Husband : These days men have to wage a grim struggle to safeguard their interests.

Wife : All right, I accept your idiotic condition which reflects your sense of inferiority.

Husband : (Gets up and takes out a measuring tape from the table drawer and measures the distance in a most business-like manner. The wife watches on, her eyes fixed on the floor to make sure that he does not play foul. After measuring the distance he makes a mark on the tape. In the same manner he measures the distance from his wife's chair to the kitchen door and makes another mark on the tape.) Look, your distance is shorter by one inch.

Wife : (Looks at the tape intently to satisfy herself) All right, I'll make the tea. (shows no sign of getting up from her chair)

Husband : (He sinks deeper into his chair)

Wife : You want tea or coffee?

Husband : What will you have?

Wife : I'll take tea.

Husband : I'll have coffee.

Wife : Why do you oppose me in everything? It's nothing but self-conceit.

Husband : You remember the day before yesterday, you asked me and I asked you. You said coffee and I said all right, the same for me. You remember, what you had said after that?

Wife : What had I said?

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Husband : That I have no opinion of my own and that I want to follow you in your footsteps in everything.

Wife : Yes, I had said it and rightly so. You don't have any opinion of your own in personal matters.

Husband : In that case the charge of self-conceit should not hold water and must be regarded as baseless.

Wife : It seems you don't even have a remote familiarity with Freud. It's a basic principle of Freudian psychology that the weaker the ego the more it tries to manifest itself in an exaggerated form.

Husband : An obsessive study of Freudian psychology has already made you a mental case.

Wife : Call me a mental case? Why not say that I've learnt the art of coping with a neurotic like you?

Husband : I'm not a neurotic by any stretch of imagination.

Wife : You are a born neurotic.

Husband : I don't have any symptoms of neurosis.

Wife : The most important symptom of neurosis is that the neurotic is not aware of his symptoms and he thinks his behaviour is normal.

Husband : Wrong. Absolutely wrong. The most important symptoms of neurosis are the mania of washing hands, the phobia of dark places, the fear of rodents and furred animals, the fear of water and the mania of shoplifting.

Wife : These are the types of neurosis, not its symptoms.

Husband : They are its symptoms.

Wife : No, they are its types.

Husband : They are its symptoms.

Wife : I say, they are its types. All right, bring the Encylopaedia. We shall check this point.

Husband : You bring the Encyclopaedia because I had measured the distance.

Wife : But there is no link between the Encylopaedia and the distance.

Husband : If there's no link between the two it should not stop you from bringing the Encyclopaedia.

Wife : (in a compromising mood) You bring it today, I'll bring it tomorrow.

Husband : No, you bring it today, I'll bring it tomorrow. (Nobody gets up)

Wife : This is what they call the exploitation of women. Because, you men believe we are the weaker sex.

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Husband : This is a manifestation of your inferiority complex.

Wife : This idea of inferiority complex—you have in fact stolen it from me.

Husband : You women can never get emancipated.

Wife : You are jealous of our emancipation.

Husband : Because you want to get emancipated and at the same time want to enjoy the privileges of feminity. This is unbearable for me.

Wife : Blandishments and coyness are a woman's born rights. No power on earth can snatch them away from women.

Husband : No power on earth can bring the woman on the right path.

Wife : What is the right path?

Husband : The straight path.

Wife : I'm not asking its meaning.

Husband : Then what are you asking?

Wife : I'm asking its import. I want to know its underlying idea.

Husband : What is the difference between meaning and import?

Wife : First you tell me what you mean by it?

Husband : No, first you tell me the difference between meaning and import.

Wife : No, I won't.

Husband : Then I won't either.

(A prolonged silence marked by impatience and irritation. They again revert to their book and newspaper respectively)

Husband : (Suddenly), You haven't gone to make coffee. It had been decided that this time you ...

Wife : (Giving a start and speaking in a subdued tone) Oh, I had just forgotten. (Puts down the book). I'm going just now (Proceeds towards the kitchen, and disappears into it, leaving the door ajar).

(Pause)

Husband : (Engrossed in the newspaper and then turns on his side. Sits still for a while and then starts shaking his knees and stares at the wall. Then he gets up and proceeds towards the kitchen and returns when only half way through. Sits down and again repeats the process. Goes towards the kitchen on stealthy steps and peeps in once and then again, in the manner of hide and seek, taking care not to reveal his presence. Then as if overcome by weariness, he comes back and settles down in the chair. Impatiently, he looks

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towards the kitchen door and then his gaze travels to his wrist watch and comes to rest on the newspaper. He repeats this process several times.

(A pause)

(The wife returns carrying a cup of tea and a cup of coffee on a tray. Looking pleased, the husband pushes away the newspaper, and taking the tray from his wife places it on the table and gives his wife an ardent look. He repeats this gesture a several times. In the next few minutes they sip their beverages while conversing with each other.)

Husband : You have taken too long over it.

Wife : I've taken just ten minutes.

Husband : Twelve and a half minutes.

Wife : Ten or at the most eleven and a half minutes.

Husband : Full twelve and a half minutes.

Wife : Like money lenders you seem to keep count of every single minute.

Husband : In this world mathematical truths assume great importance. They stand supreme.

Wife : Even then you run into such serious errors—mistaking eleven-thirty for twelve-thirty.

Husband : And you call twelve-thirty eleven-thirty.

Wife : You determined to stake your life for a paltry moment, so it seems.

Husband : It is not a question of a moment. It is a question of principles.

Wife : I've been hammering into your head for the last two hours to teach me driving. It would have made a nice outing—these two hours.

Husband : What did you say? Outing? You must know an outing and driving don't go together.

Wife : Why not?

Husband : Because when you are enjoying the sight of the blue sky, counting the wings of flying birds and commenting on the colours and the species of trees you just forget to manipulate the steering wheel.

Wife : You are a great one even for ransacking my small joys. It takes away all the fun out of sightseeing.

Husband : It is futile to expect from you to handle anything in a scientific manner.

Wife : You are totally bereft of poetic imagination. It is because

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you have never read Ghalib. And as for Iqbal, I wonder if anyone in your family have even heard his name down the generations. (reciting in a poetic tone) ... The morning sky in the desert/The heart and soul of life.

Husband : (Impromptu) From the fountainhead of the sun flow rills of sunshine ... See, I even remember Iqbal's second line. I'm not dull like you.

Wife : You had heard this line from me and then memorised it.

Husband : It means that you know two or three couplets only and you go repeating them adnauseam.

Wife : It means that unless you hear a couplet a thousand times you can't remember it.

Husband : The day before who recited to you Jigar's couplet? You knew nothing about it.

Wife : Which couplet?

Husband : The one that I had recited to you.

Wife : Which couplet had you recited to me?

Husband : Of course, the one that I had recited to you. I can't remember it now off hand.

Wife : Which goes to show that you hadn't recited anything to me.

Husband : I can prove it that I had recited it to you. Please hold your peace for a moment. I must tax my mind.

Wife : The couplets which one has to tax one's mind to recall cannot become a part of one's poetic asset.

Husband : Quiet please. Let me tax my mind.

Wife : All right, go ahead.

(Pause)

Wife : You are not only dull but you are also slothful into the bargain. You have very cleverly slurred over the question of driving.

Husband : You can't learn driving.

Wife : Why can't I?

Husband : Last week you narrowly escaped committing an accident. Had I not applied the hand brake that old woman would have surely died.

Wife : You hadn't applied the hand brake. I had put on my own brake.

Husband : No, you hadn't. I had put on mine. At that time your mind was roving in some dream world.

Wife : I was engrossed in seeing the sunset. I was *not* roving in

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a dream world.

Husband : A person who gets engrossed in admiring a sunset can never learn driving.

Wife : A man who cannot get engrossed in admiring a sunset can learn next to nothing in this world.

Husband : But so far as driving is concerned you are an imbecile.

Wife : And in the matter of teaching driving you are an idiot.

Husband : I've been teaching you for the past five years and yet ...

Wife : Whose fault?

Husband : Yours.

Wife : No, yours. You don't know even that much. Educationists have proved to the hilt that if a child gets plucked in the examination and becomes abusive, the blame is to be squarely laid at the teacher's door. Even his promotion must be stopped. Or, he should be put on a refresher course. It is a kind of punishment which has been devised to take place of the summer vacation.

Husband : Such education experts should be shot dead. They are responsible for spoiling the children's minds. That is why conditions in our country have become so chaotic.

Wife : Even psychologists have ...

Husband : You have again brought psychologists into the picture. These people are a great fraud.

Wife : You and I belong to under-developed countries. But in the developed countries such as Britian, America and the countries of Europe psyche-therapy is greatly in vogue. Except in Russia, where social realism and this kind of therapy are at daggers drawn. There, if the children steal, make faces at their teachers, indulge in kissing in the class, their mothers are punished for such misdemeanours on their children's part.

Husband : Thanks for your long lecture. But why should mothers be punished for their children's fault? Court marshalled for it?

Wife : But therapy is a kind of court marshal. The mothers have to report at the clinics. Every week they have to take appointments from the therapists. They look so meek before them.

Husband : (looking duly impressed) And then?

Wife : And then the therapist digs up dead bodies. He takes out lost skeletons from cupboards.

Husband : (In the same vein) And then?

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Wife : (In an imposing tone) Then he refers their cases to a bigger therapist.

Husband : (Duly impressed) And then?

Wife : The same story begins denovo. It goes on and on.

Husband : How long does it continue?

Wife : It continues for their whole lives. If mothers don't believe in family planning ...

Husband : Family planning?

Wife : Yes, family planning. Because the children born after these first children are born abnormal. By the time these children are treated and declared normal the next group which follows these is again born abnormal.

Husband : For God's sake stop. I have a feeling that your own brain has got unhinged and you have become the mother of all the abnormal children in this world. I fear I'll have to take you to America for treatment.

Wife : All your life you won't be able to amass the wherewhithals to take me to America. You are utterly lacking in ambition. And you don't have any verve in life. Nor can I discern any extraordinary faculty in you.

Husband : If I am such a mediocre why did you chose to marry me?

Wife : Because after Pakistan came into being the market for girls just dried up, all the eligible boys having migrated to Pakistan. Only mediocres like you were left behind.

Husband : In that case why didn't you remain unmarried? Why did you marry me to make my life a hell?

Wife : Because I am a hard-boiled realist. And without marriage a girl does not feel liberated.

Husband : It means that you started your life on the basis of a compromise?

Wife : So you believe that real life starts with marriage only?

Husband : Then what does life start with?

Wife : With suspension of life. Achieving an equilibrium, making it congeal. Specially with people of your ilk.

Husband : What's life in your case?

Wife : What do you think?

Husband : Hell, inferno, a whirlpool, humiliation.

Wife : Is this the summation of our lives? Yours and mine?

(Pause)

Silence
Boredom

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Emptiness
Uneasiness

Husband : Let's go and sleep.
Wife : I can't sleep with you tonight.
Husband : That's what you are saying every day.
Wife : That's because how I feel every day.
Husband : But why?
Wife : Your body—it smells of perspiration.
Husband : So does your body. It also smells of perspiration.
Wife : My body doesn't smell at all.
Husband : Yes, it does. I smell it every day.
Wife : It must be your own smell.
Husband : There is a difference between my smell and yours. I can clearly make out the difference.
Wife : Are you an expert in the art of smelling?
Husband : I've been smelling this body odour for the past five years.
Wife : But I've told you my body does not exude any odour. Only your body smells.
Husband : Your body smells—it does.
Wife : Well, I can't stand the cocktail of two body odours.
Husband : Why don't you take a bath?
Wife : You can also take a bath. Why don't you?
Husband : If you can't take a bath I can't either.
Wife : I don't take a bath because you also don't take it.
Husband : I don't take it because you don't take it either.
Wife : There will be another week coming for a bath.
Husband : Then go to sleep.
Wife : Let's go to sleep then.
(They both get up and pull the curtain across the sofa-bed)

(The curtain comes down) □

Translated from Urdu by Jai Ratan

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AN EXCERPT FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BATUKU PUSTAKAM

Uppala Lakshmana Rao

THAT year, 1922, the Latin Professor of the University (Tubingen, Germany) invited me and (my friend) Menon for a dinner during Christmas holidays. I had to go alone as Menon was away in Stuttguart town. I met a girl in the party, who was remarkable. I enquired later from Menon about that girl. "She belongs to a rich Swiss family. Her father was in the business of artificial silk. The mills were badly affected during the war. The (Latin) Professor's daughter and that girl had studied together at Zurich. She was doing medicine but had discontinued and started helping her father whose nerves had been badly affected. She is still a casual student of the medical college. A team of medicos from Zurich are visiting the hospitals and medical colleges of Tubingen and she came alongwith that team. (The Professor's son) Hans, who is doing his doctorate in Chemistry, intends marrying her after completing his doctorate and securing a job. Her name is Melly Scholingor", Menon said. As she did not know English nor I German, our friendship was limited to saying hellow. After our introduction—Hans, Melly and I used to visit a restaurant every evening and feast on ice cream cakes and coffee.

She had already read the biographies of Gandhiji, Vivekananda and Ramakrishna Paramahansa by Romain Rolland apart from the biography of the Buddha by Oldenburg.

After the visit, while returning to Zurich, Melly invited Hans and me to Zurich for her birthday. As his research was in the final stages, Hans could not go. I did.

During the summer, Melly came to Tubingen. We went around the Schwarzwald (Black Forest) during that three month summer vacation. We would return home—once in two days—bathe, have a good meal, change into clean clothes and set out again. We used to

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cook our meal over a three stone stove under the shade of a tree. In those places, they milk their cattle before daybreak. If anybody happened to drop in then, they serve as much milk as the visitor could drink, totally free of cost.

Hans got his doctorate that September. He secured a job in a big factory. We had planned for a long time that we three would spend a carefree month when Hans got his job. The factory where he had got the job was in Bobingen, fifteen miles away from Augsburg. Hans got accommodation in the factory compound. Bobingen being a tiny village, we could not get any accommodation. There was a single big vacant room in a house which was two kilometers away. "You both stay in it. We will put a curtain across the room. The room will become two independent parts," Hans said. "It may not be proper for both of us to stay in a single room. I will go back to Tubingen" I said. "No. That won't do. Don't we have mutual trust? You cannot go." he forced me to stay back. He fixed a curtain the next day.

We used to meet at Augsburg at five in the evening every day, have coffee and go to some concert or play and return to our places of stay late in the evening.

One evening, as usual, we had been to a concert. But, after an hour, I desired to go back as I did not like the concert. Hans was ready to accompany me as he too did not like it. "The music is OK for me. If you do not like it, please proceed. I will catch the last train for Bobingen after the concert," Melly said. Hans and I left for the station. We boarded the train. When it started, I realised that Melly's season ticket, money purse and room keys were left in my pocket. I didn't know what to do. When I told this to Hans, he very casually said " Dont worry. She will somehow come back. Alternately, she may stay back in a hotel at Augsburg and will return tomorrow morning." Lost in worry and thought, I fell asleep. After some time, hearing the sounds of stones on the window panes, I got up. I lifted the panes and shouted "Who is that?" "It is me. Melly" was the reply. I looked at my watch. It was three; which meant Melly had missed her train and had walked all those fifteen miles. "You walked all alone in this night. What if something had happened?" I said. "What could happen? If one is familiar with jujitsu and enjoys some physical strength, the mind would have the courage," she said casually and went and slept in her portion.

We were having our coffee, as usual, at Augsburg the next evening. I told Hans about Melly's trek of the previous night.

★ ★ ★

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The issue came up for discussion. The discussion got into some other controversial issues. Melly and I shared common views. Hans differed with us. He did not like our unanimity of views. "You are isolating me. I do not like you two sharing a single room. It amounts to treachery" he said. "Please believe that we neither indulged in romance nor in sexual acts. Why do you accuse us needlessly" we said. He said not listen. "You both are on one side. Get married and be happy. Melly! Let us part. Let us presume we have never met." He bade good bye, hastily picked up his attache case, took a taxi and left for his factory.

'Damn it, it took an adverse turn' we felt. Melly left for Zurich the next day; I for Tubingen. We did not come across Hans after that day. Nor did we have news of him.

★ ★ ★

By October, I completed my dissertation. I submitted it to my professor and requested him "Sir, it is four years since I left my country. I am in financial difficulties. The examination is scheduled for December. I cannot wait that long. Kindly arrange to examine me next week."

"I will speak to the dean, rector and registrar. I don't have any objection. I hope they will also agree", he said. As expected, I received a written invitation for the viva voice—scheduled for the next week. The Dean and the professors of Geology and Geography were the examiners. I was at the examination hall by ten o'clock.

"We are not as familiar as you are with your work. Please speak for half an hour on your topic" my professor said. They were not exactly mesmerised by my talk. The Geology professor and the Geography professor questioned me for an hour each. I replied satisfactorily. "Mr. Lakshmana Rao, if you can go out for fifteen minutes, we will deliberate and let you know the result" the Dean said. Those fifteen minutes were like fifteen aeons for me. I was then called in. Our professor stood at the enterance of the hall and said, "Mr. Lakshmana Rao, you have failed in the exam."

The Dean interjected quickly "Sir, this is not the time for leg pulling. Mr. Lakshmana Rao, you are Dr. Lakshmana Rao from today. Congratulations" and he shook my hand. I rushed to the telegraph office and sent a telegram to Barampuram (Berhampur in Orissa) informing my family of the result and asking for an amount of forty pounds to be sent to Thomas Cook, Zurich, for my steamer ticket. I sent a telegram to Melly also.

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The whole week was taken up with dinners hosted by the professors and associate professors. After that, I left for Zurich. Melly and I used to visit Cook's office daily to enquire about the money that was to come from my home. It did not arrive. The due date for the departure of the steamer by which I wanted to travel was fast approaching. Left with no option, I borrowed thirty pounds from Melly and bought a deck passenger ticket from Naples to Bombay and set out in a week's time.

★ ★ ★

The evening before my departure, Melly said:

"As per our social custom, it is the man who proposes to a lady. But, I am asking you. Will you marry me?"

"Who proposes first is not important" I said. "Mutual love should be the corner stone for marriage and living together. I will write to you after reaching back home and getting a job. You may please come over to our country and learn on your own about our customs, conditions and family tradition. Even in matters of toilet, our life style differs from yours. We bathe in the open at the well; many of our houses do not have bathrooms."

"We do not have separate rooms for each member in our houses. We spread our bed rolls on a terrace or a verandah or a passage and sleep at night. We sit on the floor and eat with our hands from banana leaves. You may not find these things to your liking. Ours is a poor family. We are not at all rich."

"Many people live in unhygenic conditions which are beyond your imagination. Horse riding and rifle shooting—which you are used to—will be impossible there. Jujitsu will also be impossible. There won't be any question of sailing in the seas or sea-bathing. You won't have facilities for tennis, badminton or volley ball. You can, of course, indulge in inexpensive indoor rural games of Andhra such as *Gachhakaayalu Vaamana Guntalu* and *Chinta Pikkalu*. You can also play *Kaalla Gajji Kankaanamm*. They won't strain you physically."

"Above all, we are leading a life of semi-slavery under the British. This fact stands before us every day of our life. I am telling you all this not because I don't like to marry you but with the belief that you should know these things in advance. Kindly visit our country, spend some time and propose again. Rather I will propose to you at that time. Till then let us remain friends."

"Yes I will certainly make a visit," she said.

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(In 1929), I received a letter from Melly. "As advised by you, I am coming to India to know the land first hand. I will be arriving at Bombay." she wrote. I went to Bombay and straightway brought her to Barampuram; we travelled third class. I remember that we used to live together in Barampuram—of course, her banana leaf used to be laid out a little away from us. (This reference is to the orthodox custom which does not allow dining with people of other castes and faiths—Tr). After 10 days, we went to Chatrapuram on the invitation of Kodukula Narasimham, a person I knew well, and spent a couple of days at their house. A friend of Narasimham's had a garden with a cottage on the outskirts of the town. We spent a month and half in that cottage.

A few years back, one Mr. Rudiger had translated and published Gandhiji's *Harijan* essays into German. Melly wrote to Gandhiji and obtained his permission to translate and publish his essays further into German. As the garden was peaceful, the translation work progressed well.

I saw an advertisement for a Botany Lecturer at Aligarh Muslim University. The post was temporary but likely to become permanent. I applied. They called me for an interview, I left Melly with a friend's family and went to Aligarh for the interview. I got the job. The salary was good: Rs. 350 per month. I wrote to Melly to join me. She came. The faculty was 300 strong. I and another one in Philosophy Department—we were the only two Hindus; the rest, Muslims. During our Aligarh days, Melly was bedridden with typhoid. She suffered with acute dysentery and gradually recovered after three weeks.

★ ★ ★

A fellow lecturer took me aside one day and said "I have to talk to you in confidence."

"What about?" I said.

"Who is the European lady living with you at your house—your wife? The Vice Chancellor asked me to enquire" he said. I felt irritated.

"You are asking me because he so desired. Well, you should also convey my reply, verbatim, to him. She is neither my wife nor my mistress. She is my friend who came to see India. I accommodated her in my house. Who gave the Vice Chancellor the right to interfere in my personal matters? Is he a policeman in disguise? All that he should enquire about is as to how I am discharging my teaching responsibilites. But, this sort of policing is not in good taste. Please

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convey all this to him on my behalf," I said.

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I received a letter from Venkata Ramaswamy Uncle in Visakhapatnam which said that they were going to attend the Lahore Congress and wanted Melly and me to join them in Calcutta so that we all could travel as a team. In addition to the Christmas holidays, I applied for another weeks leave and set off to Calcutta by train. We travelled third class. After covering Allahabad, Gaya, Prayag, Kasi and Haridwar, we arrived at Lahore—in time for the Congress. Melly met Jawaharlal Nehru and requested him for a visitor's pass. He wrote out a special pass in his own hand. We all stayed at the delegate's camp. On the midnight of December 31st, 1929, on the banks of river Ravi, we all pledged to achieve total independence by non-violent means under the leadership of Gandhiji if necessary even by totally breaking away from the British.

After the Congress, Melly translated into German Vallabhai Patel's letter to the Viceroy and the letter of Gandhiji—seeking complete independence and stating his intention to launch a total independence movement in case the British did not declare independence and sent them to the *Noyo Zurichar Zaitung*, the foremost daily of Zurich. (The daily published complete texts of the letters)

On the 12th of March 1930, Gandhiji commenced Salt Satyagraha and proceeded on his 'Dandi March'. Melly wanted to see the Sabarmati Ashram, the ashram life Gandhiji pronounced, the extent to which the ashramites follow his principles in their daily life and as to how the Ashram looks like in the absence of Gandhiji. She proceeded to Sabarmati.

I conducted the annual examinations at Aligarh, corrected the answer sheets, handed them over in the office, sold off my furniture and proceeded to Sabarmati. I remember spending six months and Melly a year at Sabarmati. We learnt to spin. Being visitors, we were not required to share the daily chores such as cleaning the toilets, cowsheds and kitchen untensils. However, we undertook those jobs along with other Ashram inmates.

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Melly received a message that her father was ill and that she should come back immediately. She left for Zurich via Colombo. But, even before reaching home, she got the news of his demise. After a few days of Melly's reaching Zurich, she wrote.

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"I visited India as per your advice during 1929-36 and saw the conditions there."

"I am once again asking you to marry me. If you agree, you will have to accept one condition. Our marriage should take place in the Soviet Union where women enjoy equal status in all walks of life—be it social, economic, educational, technical, spiritual, matrimonial or political. If you accept this condition, send me a telegram 'Agreed.' As soon as I receive you telegram, I shall start preparations for our Moscow trip".

I was happy at the turn of events. I sent a telegram to Melly: "Agreed."

I made all the preparations for the Europe trip. I informed my relatives that I would be going to Moscow and marry Melly there. Having known Melly well, whatever their private feelings were about our marriage, they did not come out with any objection. Even if there were some, which lovers would care for objections in a love marriage?!

But, the Zurich family did not like our idea of going off to Moscow for our marriage. Melly's brother was in tears under the impression that the Bolsheviks would kill all foreign visitors to Soviet land and leave he would not to see us again. In view of the lack of diplomatic ties between Switzerland, England and India with the Soviet Union and because of the venomous propaganda that was going on against the Soviet Union, Melly's family were worried. We obtained the passport through the Intourist organisation and arranged for a ten day Moscow tour. It was a two day journey from the eastern border of Poland to the western border via Warsaw. The Intourist people met us at the Moscow station and took us to a hotel.

The hotel in Moscow had about 120 rooms. The manager was a Khazak lady. She informed us that we needed to take three passport size photographs and pay a fee of two roubles for our marriage registration. She also arranged a German interpreter. The German interpreter arrived at our hotel at 11.50. When I proposed to take a taxi to reach the registrar's office at the scheduled time of 12 o'clock, the German Interpreter negated the idea "Why unnecessary expenditure? It is just a ten minute walk." We walked and reached the office in time. The Registrar was an elderly lady. She entered our passport numbers and names in her register, collected the fee of two roubles, and pasted the photographs in the register. She gave the marriage certificate and offered her best wishes.

On the evening before the marriage, we spoke at length to each other "Mutual respect, love and mutual understanding that resulted by moving together is the corner-stone for our marriage. We are

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inheriting equal rights and an easy and simple method of divorce through the Soviet system. We will have comfortable life together if we marry on this foundation," I said.

"Now that we are entering into a life of togetherness, I would like to talk to you about an important matter." I explained to her about our classmate in fourth standard, Venkayya, how he was illtreated by our other classmates and the mental torture he underwent.* "Our children must not undergo a similar humiliation. Who knows what sort of children we will have: they could be normal or could be devilish. They may look like Indians or may look like Eurasians. They could be black eyed or cat eyed. They could be of black hair or blond hair. What would be their mother land—India or Switzerland? What would be their mother tongue—German, Telugu, English or a German with your Swiss accent? What type of dresses will you give them? What type of food will you give them? We will have to face all these problems. We may not be able to solve some of them. Even if we solve these problems there is no guarantee that our children will approve of the solutions. Hence, we should observe celibacy and be prepared to ensure that we will not have any children. Would you accept that?" I asked.

"I accept. I also have two conditions. You should not insist on my wearing a sari. There is no other garment as clumsy as a sari. Foreigners may praise a sari as very beautiful and artistic. I do not think so. I would wear a knicker or a trouser or a pyjama. You should accept it. Secondly, you should not force me either to put on a bindi or jewellery or a ring or a necklace or a *mangala sutram*. Even if you insist, I wont do it."

"I accept your conditions" I said.

On the evening of our marriage, the hotel manager called me and asked. "I kept a double room ready for you. It would work out cheaper. Shall I arrange to shift your luggage into it?"

"No please, we would continue in our respective single rooms" I said. □

She was speechless.

Translated from Telugu by Amarendra Dasari

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* ("Venkayya would perhaps have been born to a European sergent and a Telugu woman. Our class mates used to hurl abuses at him as if he was responsible for his birth. He would run away weeping; they chased him with stones. I used to pity as to how he would been cursing his parents. This left a deep impression in my mind and was instrumental in a major turn in my later life"—Dr. Rao records early in his autobiography)

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FIGHTING THE STATUS-QUO

Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya in Conversation with Suvash Satpathy

S.S. : You are a novelist, a short story writer, a poet and a dramatist. Also a social historian. But your readers mostly recognise you as a novelist. Why is it so?

B.K.B. : When I write a novel I take up such a broad canvas that it covers the entire gamut of a period or an incident. I choose history as its background and my characters are the real witnesses to those incidents and times. But why my readers consider me primarily as a novelist is a question that my readers can better answer than me. I consider myself as much a poet as I am a novelist or a short story writer or a dramatist. I should claim that I am a humanist to begin with.

S.S. : In most of your novels, one finds the socio-political and economic picture of pre—as well as post-independent and undivided Assam. Do you find the subject very much akin to you and convenient for collecting materials for your writings?

B.K.B. : You see, most of my novels are based on the social life of Assam. I am an inseparable part of it. I have felt it, realised it, was born and brought up in it. The political, economic and cultural problems are only a part of it. But they are mere incidents. My characters are psychologically very much conscious about it. Be it in *Mrityunjaya* or in *Iyaruingam* or in *Pratipad* or in *Sataghni*. I think history is the greatest master of humankind. No one can escape from it. When a writer writes anything, he has certain incidents, happenings and characters in his mind as his model. That provokes him to write, instructs him how to

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write, and guides him in which way to write. Can you avoid the realities of life that in due course becomes history?

S.S. : Dr. Bhattacharyya, it is said that when you create a character, you tag him with a bunch of historical incidents, to make that character more acceptable to the readers. What is the reason behind it?

B.K.B. : When you write a novel or a short story, you have to present a situation. Without incidents how can you proceed? Take for example, my major novels. They are based on such historical incidents which did occur sometime in the past and which I saw and experienced. A character is a part of this situation. When I take the 1939 oil employees' strike in Digboi I cannot avoid the real incidents that happened then. When I take the 1942 movement in *Mrityunjaya*, I cannot just ignore such incidents like the derailment which took place in Panikhaiti near Guwahati in 1943. In *Iyaruingam* similar kinds of incidents I project to which I was a mute observer in Ukhrul, Manipur. But within myself I was a rebel. So, almost all my novels, to the best of my knowledge, are realistic and they are a part of our history, our society and our contemporary life. Is not that sufficient to solve your doubts?

S.S. : What about your characters? The incidents support them much. They otherwise seem very much reactive, almost rebellious.

B.K.B. : Reactive to what? To the situation. To the time and to the people who find their way. Actually my characters are victims of situations. They suffer, but do not tolerate their fate silently. Can you imagine the plight which the Tankhul Nagas suffered? I have seen it. I was a teacher there. I know the reason and rationale behind their rebellion. Their fight was for an utopian society, a kind of Gandhian Ram Rajya, that they once had. You know, *Iyaruingam* was not complete in itself in projecting this untold story of the Nagas. So I wrote *Prem Aru Mrityu*, my latest novel. It is a sequel to *Iyaruingam*.

S.S. : At times readers complain that they don't know much about Birendra, the poet. What explanation do you have for them?

B.K.B. : The complaint is partially right. My first collection of poems was published only in 1992. I had been hesitant to publish. I felt poetry had to be defined. Yet I continue to write

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poetry. Most of them have not been published in book form.

S.S. : You have got tremendous amount of sympathy towards the rebellious characters who declare war against the established authorities in the society in your novels. Why is this so?

B.K.B. : The urge for rebellion came to me with the freedom movement. I was and am poor, and come from a backward region, of the country. Should not my characters rebel? Then is not the artist a rebel? His conscience rebels against the status-quo and builds the world anew in his work. He thus creates values.

S.S. : Please say something about your childhood that shaped such a great personality, a great artist in due course.

B.K.B. : While I was a child, I was inquisitive, imaginative and aspiring for the unknown. My mind loved visual impressions. Some of these visual impressions I still retain in my memory. Often I feel like a zero, lost in juvenile contemplation of the tea garden life and of the rich nature in my place of birth. I feel all these belong to me. I do not know if these visual impressions have anything to do with my later writings. Perhaps they have. But why do you thrust greatness on me? I am just an ordinary writer.

S.S. : When did you first start writing and what was the first medium of your artistic expression?

B.K.B. : I wrote while I was a student in high school. The first piece was probably a poem on Sankardeva. I wrote my first short story in the school magazine, *Geuti*. I wrote essays for school literary associations too.

S.S. : Once you started writing novels, you almost stopped writing poetry. Is it because you could not pursue prose and poetry simultaneously or for any other reason?

B.K.B. : I wrote a novel in Calcutta in 1945-46, while I was in the Hardinge Hostel studying law, and working in the newspaper *Advance*, edited by Hemendra Prasad Ghose. Its title was *Mahaprasthaner Pathik*. Amulya Barua wanted to read it. Unfortunately he was killed by communal goondas and the manuscript was lost for ever with him. But still I wrote poems and some of these were broadcast by the Calcutta AIR. I remember I also wrote radio-features and dramas. I never stopped writing poems. Only it took a back-seat.

S.S. : Who were the Assamese writers who influenced you the most?

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B.K.B. : I like the writing of L.N. Bezboruah, including his humorous pieces. In my early days I read many poets of the romantic generations. I also read works of the budding realists. To name them would take a lot of space.

S.S. : Did any western writer or poet influence you?

B.K.B. : I have read many of them. I read Victor Hugo while I was a student. Later too I've read a lot of them. Two writers who impressed me most were Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Among the poets I liked Wordsworth, Stephen Spender and some others whose poems appeal to your heart. I cannot answer your question with precision. After all you read and forget what you read. What you derive from reading becomes a part of your unconscious.

S.S. : Socialist thinking and Gandhian ideas find a glorious mixture in your thought and writings. How could you assimilate both these ideas?

B.K.B. : What Gandhi, Marx, Jayaprakash and Lohia wrote or spoke used to mould my political consciousness. These had a cumulative effect on my views on society and human nature. I was induced to see life from the standpoint of the suffering humanity. It moulded my vision of reality in its sociological and psychological aspects. But I abhor the term 'political novel.' When you know and do politics, your vision of reality becomes modified, but you after all remain an artist.

S.S. : Would you speak about your participation in the freedom movement?

B.K.B. : I participated in the movement mentally and intellectually more than physically. So this participation is almost invisible. I was a good student. I lost my government scholarship. A warrant was issued against me in my village at Jorhat. But I worked in the tea garden where my father used to work. The tea garden was in another end of the district of Sibsagar. So the police could not reach me ... I think mental and intellectual involvement is more important for a writer than physical participation.

S.S. : You are often called a child of the National Independence Movement and the growing unrest of the North-East. Do you accept this qualification?

B.K.B. : Well, I am a child not only of the freedom struggle, but also of the Indian renaissance. The North-East has been in the grip of a fascinating social and cultural transition. I

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would like to share these movement's desire for a change of values.

S.S. : Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan influenced you as you have said many times. Did their influences sway you consciously or sub consciously while writing a piece of literature?

B.K.B. : My art was not influenced by them, but only my vision of society and man was moulded by their views. Their ideas and personalities certainly modified my views about man. They were epitomes of advanced humanity, if one may say so.

S.S. : Gandhian ideas are reflected in your thinking. But they are not reflected so distinctly in your writing. Why?

B.K.B. : Your impression as a reader and critical observer is interesting. In a novel, characters reveal the reality of the world around you. One or two characters may be protagonists of Gandhism, or may have orientation towards harmonising the different and often antagonistic elements of reality (which may be in disorder or utter chaos) in certain frame works of ideas and tones (or values) which may be ultimately called Gandhian. But what is Gandhism but a relentless pursuit of beauty in truth? So you have to see the aesthetic vision forgetting your political obsessions. The contradiction between Gandhian thinking and reflection of reality in a novel is a contradiction between an ideology and life as it is reflected in literature. Gandhiji's idea of art is connected with the idea of Beauty in Truth.

S.S. : Love in your novels has a different interpretation altogether. It is not romantic nor even platonic. It is a serious aspect of life as well as of society and creates at times a complex problem in your works. Do you have any logic behind that?

B.K.B. : Love is not just a boy-and girl-meet affair, it is a fundamental problem in sociology, psychology, ethics and aesthetics. To state the problem in another way, it is the most potent force in human nature, which has to be in the centre of human affairs. That is why I deal with love (manifest in a character) in a setting of interaction of characters in the largest canvas of life.

S.S. : The Marxian philosophy of class-struggle, of embracing a violent path for political and social change, is very much reflected in your novels. But at the same time there is a

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parallel set of characters who preach the Gandhian ideology of *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha*. Is it a conflict within yourself that is reflected in your writings?

B.K.B. : As you know, there is a large area of life where Marxists and Gandhians, despite their different philosophical view points, advocate similar actions. You probably know that the freedom movement against British imperialism is also a struggle against international capitalism. Even M.N. Roy characterised the struggle of Digboi Oil Company workers for a union in 1939 as the second freedom struggle. This is the theme of the novel *Pratipad* which is being republished by the National Book Trust. I do not think that Marx consistently advocated the case of violent class struggle. Once he envisaged that in countries like England, Holland and probably the U.S.A., the transition from capitalism to socialism might be peaceful. On the otherhand, in this nuclear age, even eminent Marxists like Gorbachev recognised the need for nonviolence as a means of accomplishing social change as well as an ideal of the new world order. Both Jayaprakash Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia advocated similar approaches to socialism. So the co-existence of ideas of violence and non-violence in the world of my fiction is not a sign of pathological self-conflict, but a way of reflecting the reality of a prohoem-ridden world. You, might have noticed that in both *Iyaruingam* and *Mrityunjay*, I have tried to show or indicate that non-violence is superior to violence when you contemplate the fate of humanity as a whole.

S.S. : How much do you approve of sex in literature?

B.K.B. : Sex is vital to life. The man-woman relationship in society is often symbolic of the whole gamut of human relationships. In many novels, we encounter this symbolic treatment. Sex relationship is both biological and cultural. The treatment of this relationship in a novel depends upon the writer's own approach to art and life. I donot want to be an inquisitor. Only sex in literature should not be exploited commercially or for a pornographic purpose. Sex is human. All depend on the sense of proportion or aesthetic balance.

S.S. : Who among the Indian writers do you like most?

B.K.B. : I like reading Rabindranath, even now. There are other writers whose books appeal to me. I read them for different reasons. I donot know how to choose amongst them.

S.S. : Among the poets ...?

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B.K.B. : As for poetry, I feel those poems best whose diction, rhythm and contents (crystallised emotions) are harmoniously blended to produce an effect on the mind. Again, I fail to name the poet.

S.S. : What is your opinion about Indian literature, especially the literature of the post-independent period? Has it degenerated or progressed?

B.K.B. : I am not well-equipped with facts to answer your question properly. You have to distinguish between quality and quantity, between consumerism and aesthetics. One should not judge literature by mere quantity or consumerism. Writings based on degraded or vulgar aspects of reality are a sign of the loosening or demise of values. Such writings tend to denigrate the very concept of literature. However, in every Indian language, there are writers who are writing novels that represent the reality of life and poems that reflect the reality of self. This kind of literature ensures the continuity of serious literature. Some signs of development are noticeable in this literature: (a) representation of reality of life hitherto unexplored (eg., Dalit literature); (b) search for forms of representation of holistic reality of life (novels or poems of epic dimension) and (c) search for a form of novel or poetry that is adequate to depict Indian life.

S.S. : You have translated a good number of important books (novels, short stories, and history) and equally been translated into English and other Indian languages. Do you think translation is a serious work of art?

B.K.B. : I have always held that in this age of fast communication and world literature, translation is emerging as an indispensable form of text that connects literature with literature and mind with mind creating in the process a real international fraternity. Translating texts from one language to another is really a reinterpretation of the texts in alien and new linguistic contents. If the translator is competent and creative, then he can make the new text aesthetically significant. The new text in this case can be regarded as a serious literary work.

S.S. : What is the shortcoming you find in case of Indian literature in comparison to the contemporary European or Latin American or African literatures?

B.K.B. : Lack of self-confidence. Also lack of intellectual and aesthe-

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tic self-sufficiency. Latin American writers are doing better in this respect. The novelists there have enriched world literature by discovering a form of novel (the western critic calls this form 'magic realism') that seems useful or depicting the reality of life there.

S.S. : Now Dr. Bhattacharya, reminiscing your long chequered career, can you tell us what was the greatest moment in your creative career?

B.K.B. : When I discovered while writing *Iyaruingam* that I could depict the reality of Naga life in a manner that could satisfy serious Assamese readers and also give me some self-satisfaction.

S.S. : Given the choice, which work of yours would you like to choose to be the best work of yours, that has satisfied you the most? And why?

B.K.B. : So far I've not been able to choose. I hope oneday I will be able to choose. I think I have yet to write my best work and I have miles to go ....

S.S. : Have you ever thought of death?

B.K.B. : If death comes after I have written my best work in which all creative potentiality of my inner soul has been harnessed to create a real artistic or aesthetic effect, I shall have no cause for regret. Alternatively, I want to embrace death as a friend while writing words that can conquer death. But death often comes from the back door.

S.S. : Do you have any message to give to your younger generations?

B.K.B. : They should be more committed towards literature and write more self-confidently. □

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GIRISH KARNAD, THE PLAYWRIGHT

A Discussion/U.R. Anantha Murthy, Prasanna, Girish Karnad

[These are excerpts from a detailed discussion of Girish Karnad's plays arranged in Heggodu, Sagara. Prasanna, the well known theatre director, U.R. Anantha Murthy, and Girish Karnad himself participated in this discussion.]

Prasanna : To begin with, two important plays of Girish could be taken up for discussion: *Tughlak* and *Taledanda* (Death by Beheading). The credit for bringing in modern sensibility firmly to this genre should go to Girish. The Tughlak of this play sees and experiences all the tensions of the modern world and in the end becomes corrupt and a sinner, thus going away on exile. The 'sleep' that overcomes him at the end might be just sleep, a sort of death, or an endless fatigue. Girish makes another such effort in 'Taledanda'. He draws his episode from the Bhakti movement and handles the problem of modernity there too.

URA : What we respond to is the revolutionary dimension of this movement, which to a certain extent, disrupted the social barriers, and not to *bhakti* itself. Not just for you and me, it wasn't possible even for Adiga to do this. A *bhakta* surrenders himself totally.

GK : True, even Bijjala in the play questions the concept of *Padodaka*, [a ritual, in which holy men's feet are washed, and that water is considered sacred]. The very principle behind that ritual seems to be unacceptable to him.

URA : We see this conflict in every *bhakta* except

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Akka Mahadevi. A.K. Ramanujan was of the opinion that a sense of futility, waste and dissatisfaction bothers the upper-caste people but, generally not the *shudras*, or women.

Girish's plays have a lyrical quality in them. His characters in the play whisper to themselves. Tughlak and Basavanna, while speaking to themselves also become characters in the play and contribute to its totality. Doesn't *bhakti* in Basavanna get communicated when he speaks to himself?

Prasanna : The treatment of this problem, i.e. perception and communication of *bhakti,* makes Lankesh's *Sankranti* (a play with a similar theme) a more successful one and Girish's play, an ambitious one.

GK : When I set out to write *Tughlak,* I was an atheist and am still one. But my atheism stemmed from a resolute ideological stance. Sartre's atheism was very much in vogue then. I even attempted to make Tughlak, an atheist. But if you look at Tughlak's history carefully, you realise that his relationship with God is total. He banishes 'praying' from his kingdom for seven years and reinitiates prayers through the Khalifa's grandson. His faith and involvement in God and religion fascinated me and this brought about a transformative change in me. Sometimes our own plays transform us. Relationship between God and man has been one of my preoccupations in my plays. A.K. Ramanujan said 'I don't believe in God, I believe in people who believe in God.' This religious search can also be seen in *Hittina Hunja* and *Taledanda.* But if you are asking me about my personal conviction, then I don't have a definite answer.

URA : The conviction discussed here is only in relation to your works and not to your personal life. There is a debate regarding Shakespeare—whether he had any faith in ghosts. Whether he had any at all, or not, he appeared to write with conviction (laughs) or atleast thought that his characters had faith in them. This 'objectivity' is one of the great strengths of a playwright.

GK : What the playwright does is a kind of persuasion. One character persuades the other in the play, as in reality, as we three have been doing here, now. This persuasion and convincing take place between the playwright and spec-

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tators as well. Take the case of *Hamlet*. Whether Hamlet had any faith in ghosts or not, he does follow the ghost. According to Shakespeare even the ghost should have its say and Hamlet believes it. (laughs) The whole question of Hamlet's revenge is, after all, centred around the word of the ghost.

Prasanna : Girish's plays have another interesting facet as well ... 'splitting of self.' This splitting sometimes gives rise to binary opposites like Hero and Villain etc; Tughlak and Azeez in *Tughlak*, Bijjala and Basavanna in *Taledanda*; father and son in *Yayati*; brother and sister in *Anjumallige*; and in *Hayavadana*, this split itself becomes the theme—like Kapila and Devadatta, body and mind, changing minds ... etc.

GK : Yes, it is so.

Prasanna : This technique is used in different contexts, in different plays, giving rise to new dimensions. *Anjumallige* has this in the form of a dialogue between Yama and Yami, in *Tughlak*, a religious-political dialogue, in *Yayati*, desire for youth against old age, and in *Taledanda*, between religion and society. This bifurcation into two characters, or splitting of one character through an internal conflict, is the basis for the success of his plays. New Kannada playwrights have failed to make this need of the play the need of characters as well.

GK : What makes a play successful is not merely 'stating' but 'persuading.'

Prasanna : But this technique of splitting in *Taledanda* is still a mystery to me, a mystery which accounts for the debate whether you have succeeded or not. The relationship between Bijjala and Basavanna has no differences, nor is it an antagonistic one. This has a danger in the sense that Basavanna becomes an idealised character.

GK : Yes, it is a problem. How does one make an interesting character out of a saint? This problem is obvious even in *St. Joan* and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. A.K. Ramanujan once told me 'Basavanna appears to be weak in your play. He should become angry, he should condemn ...' But he doesn't do so, which means, Basavanna doesn't appear idealised.

URA : Basavanna has a sense of tact and Bijjala has ideals.

GK : That's right.

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URA : Bijjala lands up in a state of conflict due to this idealism. Your Basavanna is quite pragmatic. Take the marriage episode. Basavanna is fully aware that his ideals have triggered off that marriage and that there would be dire consequences as well. The people involved in this marriage do not know this. He knows that the movement he gave rise to would go out of hand, victimise himself. He is a *sharana* (devotee), a householder and a pragmatic character. This rare combination makes him a great subject for the play.

GK : True, and a tactician too as you pointed out earlier.

URA : Bijjala has some tact as well, because he knows that the material prosperity in his kingdom has been made possible only by the *kayaka* [commitment to work] of *sharanas.*

GK : Yes, how these *sharanas,* with such a radical philosophy, could bring about material abundance, is one of the major themes in the play.

URA : Yes, you have been quite successful there. How successful would you have been if you were to handle 'total surrender in Bhakti'? (laughs) Probably none of us can. Perhaps Bendre knew that and had apprehensions about it. This is seen in Dostoevsky too.

GK : Yes, that is Dostoevsky's subject too—the terror of faith.

URA : Ha! the terror of faith.

GK : In *Yavakreeta,* my recent play the whole play is centred around a *yajna.* The *mimansakaras* like Kumarila Bhatta and others rely on a kind of cold logic, while they justify their faith in rites. *Yajna* is merely a formal structure to attain one's aspirations and one need not have faith in God for that. Indra, Varuna and Rudra are not gods that touch your heart, bring tears in your eyes or make you fall at their feet, but are only symbols in the framework of *yajna. Yajna* is like plug point, that gives light here the moment it is switched on there. During the *yajna* an agnostic comes and declares that there is no god. I'm drawn to this. If ever we had the concept of 'One God' (as in the West), there would have been the concept of 'One and only religion' too. These people had no faith in God, they were not agnostics either.

URA : There was no need then. God was just a catalyst in attaining one's aspirations. But on the path of *bhakti* God exists the *bhakta* has to surrender himself totally.

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A question like 'do you believe in God'? terrorises Dostoevsky. An affirmation here becomes an act of externalising God. This intense faith in God enabled the disruption of many social barriers in the 12th century.

A radical change in the 'form' of the play is necessary if one tries to discover these transcendental truths—the kind of change that Shakespeare attempted in *Tempest*, deviating from the earlier forms that conformed to the notions of realism; Girish too is capable of that.

GK : I've been trying ...

URA : Another point that catches my attention in *Tughlak* is Tughlak's great ambition to realize his utopia. This dream could be born either out of egoism or 'idealism'. The genesis of this ambition is a matter of great debate even in the case of Gandhi. This conflict destroyed Stalin. Girish in his plays successfully reflects this dilemma that is predominant in politics.

Another interesting aspect of his plays is the 'texture', the insights he offers into human relationships. Take for instance, the treatment of envy in man-man or man-woman relationships—how envy is generated, what it feeds on, how it grows the possible psychological depth of it ... etc. in *Anjumallige*. Envy is the basic raw-material for a novelist or a storyteller. In *Hittina Hunja*, he tries to analyse the element of evil in a religious framework. *Anjumallige* is set in England. Though it has all the qualities of a modern play, Kannada mind, has not accepted this play. Marathi sensibility would perhaps accept a literature woven around personal experience.

GK : Shantinath Desai and I did discuss this once. Unlike in Marathi urban consciousness has not evolved in Kannada. The city has not been a subject in any of our novels Yashwant Chittal did try in this direction. But it is more of Chittal from Kumta that we see in his novels than Chittal from Bombay (laughs ...)

URA : (laughing ...) the Chittal from the village ...

GK : Pune, Bombay, Kolhapur, Nagpur have all become a part of living for a Marathi mind. But in the case of Kannada writers, even Dharwad, Siri or Bangalore has been a recent experience.

Prasanna : You seem to have an anxiety that Kannada mind does not accept the 'pure modern.' It's very easy for you to

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write plays like *Hayavadana* or *Nagamandala* which have a semblance of folk literature. The fact that you have mastered the art of fabricating plays is indisputable. Such easy means at the same time may also pose restraints to your ambitious endeavour.

GK : (laughs)

URA : At a certain point Adiga's poetry was full of urban symbols. But his later poem *Bhoomi Geetha* is set in a village. When I drew his attention to it, he remarked that the Kannada language was alive only in villages and the anglicised cities did not have a language of their own.

If Girish writes a very modern play, the characters there should speak English. But he would write only in Kannada. This conflict is obvious in *Anjumallige*.

GK

GK : Yes, Ramanujan once told me that I should have written the play in English. It's quite possible to do that. But this problem should be tackled in Kannada itself.

URA :Look at *Chomana Dudi* [Choma's Drum—a novel by Shivaram Karanth]. The major part of this Kannada novel is set in a Tulu-speaking land. This is no split at all. But when the dialogues of a play set in England are written in Kannada the split is obvious.

URA

GK : This is quite a challenge to a writer in Kannada. What looks like translation when a Chinese character is rendered in Kannada, is not so when rendered in English. English can take everything.

URA :You see, Shakespeare wrote Greek plays in English! No one asks how Julius Caesar could speak in English! It is the responsibility of the writers to prepare Kannada to accept non-Kannada aspects.

Prasanna

Prasanna : *Taledanda* is an interesting experiment from the language point of view. Samsa created a different variety of Kannada for the kings in his plays. Later 'company dramas' developed a different variety for their historical plays. Still later came *Tughlak* which provided another variety of historical characters. The king in *Taledanda* speaks a rustic language. This, according to me, is not a radical shift just in Girish's language but a change in his position as well. Thus the archetypal king of *Tughlak* gives way to the folk king of *Taledanda*.

URA

URA :Here is another point, Prasanna. That is Bijjalla's caste, he is a barber by birth and that should account for his

GK

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language. Perhaps many of the Indian kings basically belonged to such castes. While speaking a caste-characteristic variety of Kannada at home, these kings might have resorted to a pompous variety in public. I have noticed this split even in the Mysore Maharaja. Girish brings out this difference very well in Bijjala. Basavanna, being a Brahmin elite, has no such split, a fact which is seen in his language. These nuances are not found in European plays at all. But here, each caste has its language and its dialect.

GK : We talk of removing caste barriers and becoming one. But the moment we speak, our caste identity too comes out, like—this is a Brahmin that is a Lingayat etc. Everyone is born into a language. Will it be possible to give up caste without giving up the language that comes along with. This applies to occupations as well. Socially caste and occupation are so much interwoven among us ... The word *Kshourika* (barber) is not merely a reference to one's occupation, but to caste as well. Sharanas' concept of 'Work without caste' generates a cultural dilemma.

URA :This is where we see the revolutionary aspect of Basavanna. 'In a state of sharana,' he says, 'your caste is dissolved'. A sharana retains his occupation, but gives up his caste. The current Marxists believe that a revolution in personal relations is possible only through a change in production-relations. Gandhi, Basavanna and Tolstoy see it the other way round—a change in production-relations is possible only through a change of heart.

Prasanna : Girish does draw our attention to this cultural dilemma in social transformation. In *Taledanda*, the brahmin mother voices her anxiety over her daughter marrying a *harijan*—'Oh my! My daughter vomits at the very smell of camphor, how can she ever manage in a Cobbler's household?'

When language and caste, occupation and caste, community and caste are interconnected, how do you give up one and retain the other? One can give up caste socially, but not culturally ...

URA :That is Bijjala's question too. Basavanna answers; 'No barrier is true, you can transcend this.' That is *bhakti*, which enables you to transcend everything.

GK : There is this last scene in *Taledanda* where Bijjala tries to

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grasp what is happening around through the eyes of a low-caste boy, who is sitting on his shoulders ... Bijjala wants to know whether Basavanna has come. What I wanted to achieve in this scene was exactly what you are trying to say; the notion of transcendence. The political significance of a boy from a lower-caste sitting on the shoulders of a king, is not as important to me as the idea that Bijjala is seeking his liberation through this low-caste boy. For, what the boy sees and comments upon is important for Bijjala's liberation. It is important not just politically ...

URA : While appreciating *Taledanda,* I still do have a couple of problems with the play. For instance, the two prominent characters, though opposed to each other, are good characters. Neither Bijjala nor Basavanna is bad. You have pushed the wickedness out of them, and you have brought that in Jagadeva, but the evil in Jagadeva is not convincingly brought out. Is he wicked or evil? His wickedness seems to be an acquired one. He harasses his wife and kills her out of petulance. Perhaps all great movements generate such extremists, like Naxalites born of Marxists.

Prasanna : I can't fully agree with your opinion that an activist, whatever movement he is in, intentionally acquires wickedness. You made a distinction between wickedness and evil. In that sense, fascism can be called evil. Fascism is not political activism. I would call naxalites extremists, not evil.

GK : If there is any fascist character in *Taledanda,* it is Sovideva, not Jagadeva.

Prasanna : Jagadeva is anti-life. He neglects his dying father, harasses his wife, kills Bijjala for no reason, while making Jagadeva anti-life, I suspect that you are equating extremist activists with anti-life characters. Political activists, that too extremists, are romantics.

GK : No, when one pursues abstract arguments, there is always the danger of becoming anti-life. Even Gandhi was branded anti-life, some westerners have even raised the question of what his wife would have felt when her husband stopped sleeping with her. A strong spell of abstract thoughts makes life inconsequential.

Jagadeva is under the illusion that becoming a Sharana is being a *brahmachari.* Basavanna was neither a *brahmachari,* nor did he advocate abstinence. Jagadeva has

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all the drawbacks found in the Punjab terrorists ... ill-treating women, slashing the finger and applying blood on the forehead, following *brahmacharya,* not speaking to wife ... all these are standard patterns ... masculinity is superior, woman is out to spoil man ...

Now here is again a controversy about abstinence ... (laughs ...)

URA : O' Really?

GK : Yes, the controversy about M.A. Kalburgi.

URA : about Neelambike ...

HGS* : ... Sri Kalburgi is facing the wrath of some for stating that Basavanna was born out of physical relationship and not from *prasada.*

GK : There is another interesting story about Neelambike. Lord Shiva comes to Basavanna to test him in the guise of a *yogi* and asks for a woman. After a complete search for woman Basavanna finds none around ... not even prostitutes. (laughs). As he could not say 'no' to a *jangama,* he offers his wife herself! Pleased with Basavanna, Lord Shiva gives back Neelambike to him. But Basavanna tells her—"you are like my mother. You made Lord Shiva appear before me. How can I treat you as my wife?"

Sri Kalburgi, while interpreting the *Vachanas* written by Neelambike, recognises bitterness in her tone. The debate was that Kalburgi had traced a physical relationship between Basavanna and Neelambike.

URA : When Blake's brother died, it seemed to Blake that he saw his brother ascending heaven, clapping his hands. When asked, Blake answered that he did see it. Probably one could call them *sakshatkaras,* and not merely, symbols. Yeats calls this—'literality of imagination'. In *bhakti* there is this aspect. To Akka Mahadevi, nothing is a symbol; everything is realization ...

Even to Pramahamsa, this *sakshatkara* was possible. When he offers *prasada* to Kali, Kali does not eat it. He weeps and makes a big noise. A black cat appears and eats the offering. Paramahamsa feels happy to think that the black cat itself was Kali ... (laughs ...)

GK : To Paramahamsa, the black cat was Kali herself.

URA : This is a wonderful concept. It isn't absurd. I wonder how it can be possible for a human mind? To me, it is impossible.

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Prasanna : Your contemporary Hindi writer Nirmal Verma, narrates an incident where he and his friend had lost their way in Mathura. It seems Balakrishna came and showed them the bus stand. Till Paramahamsa's time, the idea of *sakshatkara* of a symbol of believable. But it is slightly difficult to believe Nirmal Verma's statement that *muddukrishna* showed them the way.

URA : Even before, it was so, Prasanna. Blake curses Newton for destroying faith. Yeats too regrets that the modern age has lost the capacity to believe. Yeats had, 'doubts' as much as you have, but he would not revel in his doubts.

GK : Yes, torture of faith, it's a great torture to retain our faith. There is a story like this: a disciple who has a desire to reach Vykunta in his mortal form, asks his Guru for guidance. Showing him a place where four roads met, the Guru assures success in his pursuit if he sat there for ten years. After much wandering for ten years, the Guru comes back to the same place. He feels terribly sad to see that his disciple is sitting there stock still. When he sets out to beg his disciple's pardon, an ariel chariot descends, takes his disciple and leaves. Guru runs to hold his disciple's feet and thereby to reach heaven ... (big laugh ...)

Prasanna : Think we can change the subject to Girish's writings in criticism. Though he has written less, he has succeeded in tracing the creative process in a work ... for instance ... an article like *Hithina Koli* (A hen of flour).

GK : Yes, I titled it *Hithina Koli* deliberately to show that it was not on my play.

URA : That's a good article. So is your criticism on the play *Kakanakote*. It seems you have written another article which I haven't read.

GK : Yes, on Sriranga's 'Harijanvara' that appeared in *Manvanthara*.

Prasanna : I have a question that bothers me. Girish has written so many plays in Kannada, critiqued works of other writers, held discussions, yet appears to remain outside Kannada sensibility. In fact, he doesn't want to be an insider in Kannada. Chandrashekara Patila takes this observation to an extreme and says that Girish never writes in Kannada.

GK : I have not involved myself in Kannada culture the way my contemporaries Ananthamurthy, Lankesh or Tejaswi have done. I do not know why. It has not been possible

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either. Perhaps because Ananthamurthy and Lankesh have spent their time in universities.

Prasanna : No it is not merely a problem of profession. It is a problem related to your works, choice of subjects as well. Ananthamurthy is more westernised than you are, he goes abroad more often than you but still he does not have the problem of becoming an outsider.

GK : I never knew I would write in Kannada till I wrote *Yayati*. Writing in English, becoming an international poet was my ambition. (laughs ...) Till I actually went to England I thought I would never return from there. But, when I began writing in a country which reads only Eliot and Auden, suddenly Kannada came back to me! I realised that I was condemned to my language, there is no escape from this ...

URA : Was A.K. Ramanujan responsible for your decision?

GK : No, his influence wasn't so much then. Even he used to write in English then, and he had set out to go to America.

To me even now, drama means only 'Company drama'. Since I have watched only company dramas from childhood days. I have only that image. Even to write a modern play, I need to start from the image of a company drama. *Yayati* happened in Kannada because writing play was my preoccupation and that all the plays that I had watched were Kannada plays. Secondly I wrote *Tughlak*, after I returned from England.

My being a *saraswat* could be one of the reasons for the feeling that I am an outsider. This *saraswat* community itself is so. It has always remained peripheral. Barring Panjemangesh Rai's generation all others are semi-Marathi, semi-Kannada along with their household language—Konkani. This community hasn't fully been a part of the Kannada movement. I was introduced to Kannada culture only when I involved myself with *Samskara*, when I wanted to film it, after I read it. Only then my reading and interaction with this culture began. I knew a few people from Manohar Granthamala, that was all. Otherwise, I would have settled in Madras. *Samskara* has influenced me profoundly.

URA : Getting married out of caste, was quite difficult for me. Girish was more liberated from his father's time itself. What is possible for my son tomorrow, was possible for

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Girish then itself.

GK : My mother is a widow. She lost her husband when she was just 19 years old, in 1921 and married my father in 1931. My elder brother, born from her first marriage calls himself Karnad though he is Gokarna. After my mother's second marriage and after we were all born, he started calling himself Karnad, to avoid any tussels among the brothers. He became Balachandra Raghunath Karnad. When my father passed away, there was a big problem facing us—either the eldest son or the youngest should light the pyre. I was the youngest. I refused to do that, since my father had no faith in these rituals. But my mother needed the ritual. Then came the question—who is the eldest son? I suggested that Balachandra should do it. Those Purohits raised a hue and cry. According to them he was not my father's son, but to us, he was a son and a Karnad. However, *saraswat* community has got urbanised quite a lot. Stringency, in matters of caste, orthodoxy, seldom holds.

Therefore I came into Kannada quite late. *Samskara* was a picture of brahmin society and *Kaadu* was a picture of a different society, of non-brahmins, *Vokkaligas, gowdas.*

While filming *Kaadu*, Krishna Alanahalli (the author of *Kaadu*) used to be present there. One day, during make-up, he came and said that Basakka should apply *vibhuti* (sacred ash) on her forehead and later he said that even Shivaganga should do so. I asked him why. He told me that Basakka was a *lingayat,* a *veerashaiva.* I said—'Tell me Krishna, clearly, how many of these are *lingayats* and how many are *gowdas*.

He said, all good characters are gowdas ... (big laugh ...) The prostitute, the keep, Shivaganga who rapes, all these are *lingayats* according to Krishna.

I said—'This might be your sociology, I will not have these aspects in my film.'

I made all the characters *gowdas*. Krishna was to some extent simple minded in his notions.

URA : A part of him ...

GK : If you forget the inner currents of caste in this novel and see it, you notice a hierarchy there itself. For instance, to attack, Chandregowda, Shivaganga does not burn Chandregowda's share of grain, instead, he burns the stock of

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grain meant for Chandregowda's labourers. Shivaganga does not attack Chandregowda, he attacks Chandregowda's wife. Shivaganga is not attracted by Gowda's wife. It's not a sexual rape. Its one way of humiliating Chandregowda.

URA : Even in R.K. Narayan's novels it is so. There are no castes. That is how, it is easy for him to make us believe that 'Malgudi' is a representative village of India. Narayan suppresses this world of castes and subcastes and highlights another kind of truth.

Prasanna : This technique of suppressing sometimes comes in the way of the complexity of the work for eg. take Vijay Tendulkar's play *Ghasiram Kotwal*. Everyone is a brahmin here, singers in chorus, the wall, the king, good characters, bad characters all are brahmins. Therefore it is a a queer, unnatural situation. The Peshwa period was not so. If we want to know what the decadence during Peshwa period was like, we need to place the ruling brahmin class vis-a-vis other castes and then take a look.

GK : Moreover even brahmin society is not a monolith. In this play Tendulkar shows all of them as Chitpavan brahmins. There was a lot of internal tension among Maratha brahmins themselves.

URA : See, even among us the first to demand reservation in Mysore were Mysore brahmins and not Mysore shudras! Since brahmins from Tamilnadu were ruling here, the Mysore brahmins argued that there was a need to reserve jobs for locals! (laughs ...) When there are so many inner currents in a society, a writer has to decide how specific and how general he has to be in his writing.

Prasanna : Girish's statements on *saraswats* remind me of Jews.

URA : What you identify as a problem in Girish, or a virtue in me, Lankesh or Tejaswi, that 'virtue', itself is becoming a problem to me now. If I don't shake off this 'virtue', I wouldn't be able to say anything new.

GK : The new play that I'm contemplating is related to my society. Twenty years ago, my sister was to get married to a *saraswat* who had come from America. Both our families were educated, the marriage should have gone off with no hassles. But it did not. There was no problem at all, not even dowry. You see, marriage creates its own atmosphere of tension—someone didn't get tea, old fam-

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ily-feuds cropped up—such triflings grew and became a big reality. I have planned to write that itself. You are right ... We need to break out from our own frameworks.

Prasanna : How do you intend to do this?

GK : Take the case of Indian theatre. We haven't been able to make Sriranga, Tendulkar or the entire realistic tradition or realism work for us fully. When we read Chekhov the reality of Russia is unfolded before us. In that sense, none of us has been able to do what Chekhov has been. To certain extent, it was Bernard Shaw who misled Indian theatre. The British were ruling us, and these masters said that Shaw was the greatest playwright and we accepted it. Shaw had captivated us to such an extent that we grasped Ibsen's *Doll's House* only through Shaw. We did not know other playwrights like Chekhov at all.

In Shaw's plays all the characters speak effortlessly, fluently and hauntingly for at least half a page. They sound like an orchestra. But in Chekhov's plays, most of the characters cannot even speak. That's our present reality too. A daughter-in-law finds no words before her father-in-law, so does a wife before her husband. Our society is a society of extraordinary hindrances. Everything is predetermined here—who should or should not speak, where one should or should not speak, who should speak first and who later ... who should speak inside the kitchen and who should speak afterwards ... No playwright has grasped these nuances.

In our homes, womenfolk speak a lot when they serve food. They have freedom to speak only in the kitchen and in the bedroom. The reason probably is, they give food and sex. It is only there that a man sits and receives while a woman gives. She has the freedom to speak what she feels like, only there. I think in us the ultimate rebellion is abandoning one's food. Man can do only that at that moment ... at the most, abandon the food.

More such nuances should come into our plays. □

(Excerpted from *Rujuvathu* Literary Magazine, Vol. 37, published by Kavi Kavya Trust, Heggodu 577 417, Shimoga Dist. Karnataka.)

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TIME IN THE POEM

Jayanta Mahapatra

AS I see it, the act of writing a poem is like being caught up in a net of time, in which the space of experience helps to guide the feeling contained in the poem. The poem becomes the precise moment of a truth, and that moment comes through a procession of events or thoughts which take place in the poet's mind. In the making of a poem a crowding together of events or beings occurs; this is what one discovers through the act itself, and we could call this a sort of charging of the usual neutral senses that inhabit the mind of the poet. This process acts equally strongly irrespective of the quality of the poem the poet is able to produce, whether bad or good. But it is time itself that makes the poet realize that he should react, a time that appears to pass from somewhere inside himself into the outer world, similar perhaps to the lines of force that emanate from an electrical charge situated in space (or from a magnetic pole). Yet in a strange manner the time of the present which brings forth his responses, has in reality come into being from the many times he has encountered—a product of memory. It is a reversible process, and seems to work both ways. So a time encompasses him, coming back to him as it were, and the poet is left in a net in his consciousness.

This might appear on the surface as a dilemma, a dilemma that stems from the irrefutable fact that time owns us, body and soul. Yet we are not absolute victims of time. Because each one of us finds himself responsible for what happens to us during our lives. The fundamental observation that a man or woman is born at a precise instant of time (fixed by a set of coordinates), makes him a certain prisoner, true; and this fact lives at the back of his head probably for an initial number of years of his life. It is later, perhaps much later, for the not-so-sensitive, that time begins to bother them. Therefore, in a way, time becomes the main mover of our lives. And in the making

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of a poem, it is not the ordinary, run-of-the-mill type of being, who as indications show, turns out to be a practising poet—but an acute, feeling and more aware being. The awareness of this poet may be exceptional, making him/her a hypersensitive person, or a suicidal depressive; leading the person to such an extraordinary degree of stimulation that he/she writes the kind of poem he/she feels in the unconscious.

It is this aspect of time that has led me into my poems, and it makes me feel that most poets go about their poems in the same way. As I start the poem with a particular instant of time I am aware that the instant has ceased to *be* once I have put the feeling down; or precisely speaking, that which constituted the line(s) of the poem. And as the poem proceeds, with the series of images helping to build up the matter of the poem, I realize with some measure of emotion, that the time of the poem is no more with me, and this is what has made the poem non-existent. In other words, it has lost its original identity. It becomes a human dilemma in the sense that the poem, once written down, ceases to dominate the poet's conciousness; and this is what is significant to me as a poet, that the poem no longer has the voice I tried to imbibe into it, but presents another face—a face which is seen or determined by the reader of the poem, a reader who, once again, is held by a totally different instant of time.

It is difficult for me to infer that other practitioners of poetry share my view, i.e., the poem is left behind in another time as the new present begins to weigh one down with its weight. This happens primarily because the writing of poems is a continuous activity, and when a poem gets over, it is time which once again does not spare the poet's mind but "poisons" it with the restlessness of movement, something resembling the constant random motion of subatomic particles inside the nucleus of an atom. That such a mood keeps on nagging me until I go over to the making of another poem is a truth, even if the next one only helps me to escape the pursuing push of time by writing, perhaps merely to fill up a page with common stuff. Thus, between one poem and the next, the mind becomes an indiscipline of reactions. This multiple activity occupies the poet, measuring him by a constantly moving point of time that finally turns into a poem, whether trivial or significant; and it is this knowledge of the essence of time which unconsciously becomes the poet's rationalism.

If I go back and ask myself the unnecessary question as to why I started writing poetry, at a time when most other poets would have produced more or less their best work, perhaps the overwhelming sense of the inevitability of ageing was the main drive behind my writing. It was the common enough feeling of loss of years of my

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life, coupled with a space of isolation, that represented the "crisis" which ultimately goaded me to write. For who can deny that it is such a crisis that is the source of poetry? To my mind, in the last years of his life, Robert Penn Warren had been producing some of the best poetry in the United States, and this too when he had already reached the advanced age of seventyfive. His poems about time, centering on the possible clairvoyance in death, keep looking out over our lives. And one feels certain that it is time which almost always brings out the meditative weight in his later poems.

So, perhaps my very own first poem in my first book, titled "Loneliness"—a mediocre poem by any standards, but still meaningful to me because it answers in some ways the question of my writing, the 'why'. And because this first book was published in the autumn of 1971, when I was fortythree, is this presence of time in the entrails of that poem, admitted that the poem itself is a bad example of verse.

A poem, therefore, appears to me to be full or made up of various times, maybe like a dim corner in a room, inhabited by a number of spiders. Even though the poem generally is set around a certain event which takes place at a particular moment of time; even though one is speaking of, say, the death of a boy, or the ending of another year, or, about the shapes that inhabit the river Daya—it is time which becomes an eight-legged carnivorous spider weaving its ensnaring net in which the poem is trapped. To be more precise in my statement, it is the underlying emotional force of the poem that is trapped. Perhaps in the process of making the poem it is nostalgia which plays a significant part, as many moments, past and present, build their nets across their words and wait for the outcome.

On the surface, the poem may emerge as a result of the summation of events or happenings at a number of times. In other words,

$$\text{the poem} = \sum (et_1 + et_2 + et_3 + \ldots.), \text{ where } t, t, t \ldots.$$

represent different instants of time when the emotional forces in the poem came into play. And yet, such a generalisation could be full of error. This is because a poem does not represent an algebraic summation of emotional operatives. The conclusion or outcome of a good or successful poem will only happen, when, mathematically speaking, the summation is replaced by an integral, the integration taking place over the entire time in which the poem works. So perhaps

$$\text{the poem} = \int_{T_1}^{T_2} e = \int_{t_1}^{t_1+\partial t_1} e + \int_{t_2}^{t_2+\partial t_2} e + \int_{t_3}^{t_3+\partial t_3} e + \ldots.$$

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where the symbols have their usual significance. Every item in the poem is fixed and accessible. The poet can only integrate the entire process according to his or her own capacity. And the poet makes the poem *move*.

So to write his poem, the poet will be obliged to turn inward, decelerating, as he seeks out the time as it exists in him. Because the poem is a parasite around that moment which the poet perceives and which takes him into the making of the poem. Hardly has the moment entered the mind or the consciousness of the poet when it becomes caught in a mesh of other moments of time. These moments move back and forth in the poet's mind sweeping through all the years of his lifetime. At times time rushes toward him, a terrifying cataclysm, until he and his poem are drowned in the sweeping flood. I don't think the poet will have anywhere to run then. I don't think the poet would've stopped short of the horizon, his longest memory. Because time has him trapped between his memories and the moments of his own consciousness.

I'd like to give an example of such a poem, enmeshed in time, titled "The Hour Before Dawn", first published in *The Hudson Review:*

It was the hour before dawn. I awoke.
The street lamp stared lamely at my window
and a world was quiet, bewildered
as though afraid it would be lost
among thoughts. I waited for a sound,
a rain to fall and tear this silence
between today and tomorrow.
On a distant tree a light breeze combed
the leaves of darkness without a whisper.
And through the window peered my love and fear
and dreams that were mere dummies to the hour.
Unknowing, I bring my palms together.
I remember the one I loved once,
but she seemed to have another face.
My father, sad-faced father! How very far you are
from this empty room filled only with myself!
Without a sound the dark tree out there
struggles with its death in my life.
The silent world floats besides me;
tomorrow may be I'll hear my father is dead,
but he might bear the face of my son.
This is the hour when there is no distance
between the two of them.
The hour of awakening, when my speechless voice
echoes only from my father to my son,
coming to rest on the lamp post
like a weary night bird.

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So this poem, which does not show the time of one single instant. But which begins from an instant, an instant inside an experience and goes on to measure spiritual and physical dimensions from other instants associated with it.

We are all playing with time, all the while, though we do not realize this. This sounds like a cliché. Yet, in a poem, more than any other form of literature, prose or whatever, one is taking up time in one's hands, shortening it, lengthening it—playing with it in a manner that is not possible as much as in any other literary form. Maybe it is like a mass of putty in the fingers of our mind, while we wait for an identifiable shape to emerge. And this maelstrom of time is held in the unconscious, into which dawns and sunsets, and time from every conceivable instant, from past, present and future, bring up their objects. Here the poem shows its real self, threading different phenomena from many instants of time.

In a way, the poem is caught. Would it be wrong, I wonder, if I said that the time of the poem is caught like a patient in a mental asylum, between the states of her mind? Time here moves back and forth between memory and possibility, becoming an obsession of the present. Therefore, it is a state the poem never leaves. The present is a moment the poet perceives, employing his poem around that moment, realizing fully well that his 'moment' is an infinite oscillation in time.

With almost four or five thousand years of poetry behind us in India, with one's roots in an ancient mass of myth and legend, one cannot help being permeated by their time. It is time which forms the worn stone and the brown earth on which we exist, time that induces in us a blueness of the sky that is indeed differently blue from the normal blue we know of and has come to stay from the writings of others. A blue that makes up the wisdom of poetry. So with a kind of anguish the poem begins to form on paper, as though the human mind whirled with unchanging rites of time, and then got transfixed in itself.

In the beginning, writing a poem for any poet is an act which ends in an upsurge of joy, of something achieved, perhaps irrespective of whether the poem was a good one or bad. But with the passing of years, one comes to realize that the fabric of the envelope which stretches taut over the framework of the years is made out of time. In my own case, ill health has been an added hazard, hastening the making of my poetry. May be as far as I could, I have salvaged the hours of loss for my own self-expression in poetry. Or, is the poem a safety measure, a strategic reserve in case time plotted a crisis in

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my life and I needed a way out? And the poem is not a cry.

It is an abrupt opening of the eyelids as it functions in time, as time balances itself on the tightrope of memories.

And as a practising poet, I feel time acts as a carrier wave, acting between question and response, and doing the work in the poem. Perhaps, as one comes to the end of the poem, one sees some sense in the statement that the language of poetry is made up of time, not words. This is because, very simply, when I look back on a poem written a long time ago, I can see my very existence at the moment the poem was made, carrying me away on the tide of the poem's nostalgia. And this feeling can have a disastrous effect on the new poem I am trying to write.

Today I dream. So I sit down to write. I feel the confusing waves of time's pain so much so, that at times I would like to use time as an avenging god in my poem. At other moments, or in between poems, time is just a frail ghost of an enemy standing ahead in my path, and when I sense I could go through it, unscathed. And as I advance, both in my poetry and in my years, I feel I am perhaps driving the victim of time ahead of me. □

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A Writer's Point Of View: Autonomy Of Literature

Kishori Charan Das

"IF they ask me what my poetry is", said Pablo Neruda, "I must say I do not know. But if they ask my poetry who I am, it will tell them." It's a pity I cannot make such a pronouncement. I cannot afford, in these days of media power, to keep my mouth shut over the meaning of what I have written. Lest they take me for a cad or a fraud. So I would try assiduously to explain and annotate my lines, as best as I can, when I am called upon to do so. But as a writer, I am tempted to thank Neruda for having spoken out on my behalf, as also for the tribe of all writers, past and present, that my literature is but a reflection of my own unique self, and is thus necessarily mine, ever and always.

So I tend to get nervous when I hear about the theories of structuralism, deconstruction, the positioning of my child as Trishanku, at some heaven equidistant from the writer and the reader etc. I feel deprived. Rather dispossessed. How can my little one, choek-full of my timid expressions, deriving from a wordless phantasmagoria of dreams, nightmares, fears, yearnings, and what have you, assume a life of its own without involving me vitally? How can my quarrels with myself which constitute poetry in the words of W.B. Yeats be revealed without considering me? It's me, it's me—I cry out against those who appear to shield it from me, and declare that it belongs to me no more. That it lives in its own right. Somewhere there, structured in my socio-cultural milieu, and I need have no fears for its life, if it can manage to stay that way in the days to come. Or somewhere there, waiting to be peeled off, layer by painful layer by the cognoscenti, so that the 'true' meaning of what I have written is brought home to the discriminating reader. Waiting to be reborn, as it were, without the genetic blemishes and birth-marks. It is born free, they tell us gleefully, though they don't grudge me the credit of having produced it for whatever it is worth. The maker has done his bit. Over.

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But leaving aside the natural anguish of the writer being thus marginalised, if not dispossessed, can he, in his sober practical wisdom deny that the work produced by him is indeed autonomous, once it is released into the socio-cultural stream? Is it not bound to fend for itself from then on, on its own stream, and deal with the avid readers, critics and all, sharks or life-savers as they may turn out to be? Can the writer be within and inside of his works, all the way, to keep alive his ownership, and ask to be judged for what he himself presumes to be through his works? How does a Shakespeare ask posterity to judge his *Hamlet* by the unique tone and colour of the creative impulse that seized him when he created that uniquely ambivalent being? Or how does a Dostoevsky ask his *Brothers Karamazov* to be judged by the diverse facets of his spiritual discontent which are supposed to have been reflected variously in the three brothers, so different from each other? What are the modalities offered by these great writers, other than their surface humdrum lives which only go that far and no further, in providing clues to the rich complexity of their products? These are questions that need to be answered fully, and convincingly.

The writer can surely make the plea during his lifetime that the inquisitive reader is welcome to approach him for enlightenment. But is it not a specious plea, with the pitifully short and fragile life given to a man on earth? Nor can he make much of the phantasmagoria of images or secret quarrels that were woven into his creative impulse, and the consequent inarticulations imbedded in his words, which only he can explicate, as far as possible, because he cannot get away from the confession that such images, or conflicts as distinct from his overt feelings and thoughts were much too insubstantial for being passed on to the curious reader for his edification. Secondly, if we subscribe to the view advanced by some, that apart from the overt influences working on a writer which he is conscious of, there is a bucket that sometimes goes deep down the well of his unconscious, and provides a certain extra-dimension to his efforts that passes under-standing, aren't we liable to be stopped in our tracks by the likes of Jung who would remind us that the said unconscious is but a part of the racial unconscious? And that therefore no individual is privileged to know it any better than his peer in the social spectrum? Rather they would maintain that it is only the professional with his probing skills who can reveal the behind-the-scenes activities of the writer's mind, with the help of his expressed words and images, howsoever inadequate they may appear to be.

And why are you so anxious to append your signature to the

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work produced by you? It is only the lesser artist who stands revealed in his works, while the creative mind of a Shakespeare would ever remain unexplored, thanks to the joyous confidence of his genius. For it is in the nature of creation to forget the creator. Like a flower that blooms and dances with joy, unlike a miserable human being who spoils the effect, sometimes, by thinking about his Maker and consequently the sequel of his unmaking. It is E.M. Forster, an eminent writer of our times who advises me thus, arguing in effect in favour of the proposition that my literature is autonomous. And that there is no harm done to the uniqueness of my personality, even if the errant child, grows in due course to an ideal state of independence, at some future date, when it would carry no visible trace of its maker.

Thus and thus I am asked to relinquish my title over the little one, who ceases to be little as the days go by, and proves to me even within my lifetime, that the Pundits are right and my anguished cry has little relevance to the ground realities. For not unoften, I find it decked in hateful purples, praised for the wrong reasons, or shockingly denuded to "reveal" my Freudian complexes, class motivations, self-serving delights, even spiritual flights, which I could have never ever imagined for myself. And I shudder to think about the shape of things to come, when I am gone, and not available any more to put the record straight. That is, to save my creation from its new-found uniqueness, quite a stranger now to the author who had conceived and brought it forth with the intensities of his intimate self—of "blood, tears, sweat.and semen" in the words of Nadine Gordimer—and had considered it as his very own for all times to come.

So be it. Let me rather settle for the inevitable, and try to salvage my self-respect with such pleas that I can make to posterity. And let them not, like Neruda, ask my literature to tell me who I am. That could be dangerous, the reverse osmosis of a child imposing its uniqueness on the parent, a circumstance many times worse than its going its own way. However I may kindly be allowed only to register a few pleas, as follows, for consideration of this learned assembly :

—Granted that I cannot leave an indelible imprint of my uniqueness on my works, and it is bound to be smudged, corrupted, or perhaps enhanced in the course of time, I would humbly ask the reader (and in particular the critic) to bear in mind that there was a certain uniqueness in the making of what I have placed before him, and hence to try to appreciate if not imbibe, the *angst* of the creative process before getting judgemental. One of our critics had put it beautifully when he said that in understanding literature one should

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feel like being a pilgrim rather than a tourist. Empathy is all that I ask for, whether you put my works on a pedestal or in a given framework of your isms, theories, and neat formulations of scholastic dialogue.

—Secondly, while I have a healthy, rather awesome respect for the dons, I would implore them not to allow my literature to be ossified. That is, intellectualized with their valued interpretations to a point when it ceases to breathe, and is available only as an artefact in the hallowed precincts of the academia. Or available like the Vedas, only to the priests who can render its meanings unto each other, for the greater glory of literature. I hope I am not exaggerating. This seems to be happening in the West, with a view to preserve the sanctity of literature and save it from the advancing hordes of the commercial non-literature. But is this the best way to go about it? Is this how we can save it from being swamped by the thoughtless hordes? Exclusivity is not a by-word for autonomous bliss—is it? I am not a votary of the so-called mass literature. But I would like my literature to be a living and pulsating communion between me and my readers—conceived, conveyed, and received in maximum, if not total freedom, the best that can be managed in an imperfect world. This is the most honourable and viable state of autonomy for literature that I can think of. And I believe we should work for it. This is the core of my submission before my fellow-writers and lovers of literature who are assembled here.

Not any umblical cord that must inhere and proclaim its parentage. Not any academic exclusivity. Nor a self-serving isolation from other disciplines deriving from human concerns, intellectual or otherwise, which are equally valid—disciplines such as science, technology, sociology, psychology, political science, and the related activities. For they are bound to condition the thinking of the social man. And it follows that the current debates making the rounds in those disciplines are most likely to colour the making and receiving of literature with a modicum of passion and prejudice. I wish it were not so, but it can't be helped. Anyway as Alberto Moravia had said "A writer survives inspite of his beliefs", and so let me nurture my hopes on that sort of optimism and ask for certain achievable attitudes of mind on the part of the parties concerned. Namely,

(a) a *conscious* effort on the part of the writer to break loose from the constrains as he sees them irrespective of the conditionings of his birth and circumstance, which he cannot abjure as an existent man-in-society.

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(b) a reasonable effort on the part of the middlemen, the publishers, media and other such agencies, to cultivate a certain literary sensibility not necessarily opposed to their commercial interests, so that the "value-added" element caused by them is minimised; and

(c) a conscious effort on the part of the reader to receive and appreciate the writer's writing for what it is, in an exercise of empathy, removed from the constraints that work on him, as he sees them.

It is this status of autonomy of multiple levels that literature can and should aspire to, deriving from freedoms which are achievable.

In this I share the thoughts of Jean-Paul Sartre that writing is fundamentally an exercise in freedom, which the writer posits against the freedom of the reader, with the result that, as a creative work of art, it is not really "created" in the ordinary sense of the term, for it is at once existent and transcendent, a finished product which is always in a state of suspension, asking for greater posibilities of revelation and understanding for all times to come. It follows that we should not be unduly disturbed by any dissonance between the writer's meaning and the reader's meaning, and moved to do something about it, however odd it may appear to be. Things such as imbuing language itself with the mystique of autonomy, or even asking for the death of the poor author, with apologies to Barthes. For literature would then be a free-flowing process, involving both the writer and the reader, and evolving towards rich complexities just as the human society has.

The thesis is fascinating, but it appears to be no more than a vision. Yet it is my submission that we can work towards it as an ideal, as a "heaven of freedom" to be invoked in our prayers, so that while it may not be attained in the foreseeable future, it can well be sighted by the succeeding generations.

Am I being too modest in my ambitions? I hope not. Let us analyze the odds at each level, in the continuing process of creation, communication and reception of literature.

What are the fetters on my freedom to write according to my honest perceptions? I have always been asking this of myself, as I would ask all my fellow-writers to do some heart-searching about it, so that all the pieces are in, before we can deal with them, and get going as far as we can. At least push the *Lakshman Rekha* to the farthest point, that we can get away with. The pieces are many, so I will refer only to some of the mind-sets they come from, and how.

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Thus, have we been able to shake off the "sacred" burden of the past? Conversely, how far have we been able to protect ourselves from the Western winds, which are not always health-giving as being scientific or rational, but can also be faddist, flashy, and fatuous? For example, the covert sexual yearnings that go inevitably with the sad story of human bondage are still frowned upon in Indian literature written in languages other than English, if they are improper in terms of the socially-determined equation between relations. In the English language, there is, no doubt, a certain freedom from this constraint, but sometimes it translates into an anxiety to conform to some amoral pseudo-intellectualism derived from the West. Namely, the fun of calling the spade a dirty shovel, and of wallowing in obscenities for sheer effect, so long as it is laced with a smart play of words, witticisms, and some instant philosophizing. For unfortunately, the target audiences are variously different in the fractured society that we live in. But I am not unduly upset over this dichotomy. What bothers me most is that perhaps we are quite often afraid to go against the current of the mainstream, lest we are damned as deculturised aliens. Whereas many of those who cater to the urban elitist subculture are mortally afraid of being considered as *dhoti-clad* squares. Either way, we are diminished as writers. Yes, let's face it. There are many powerful peer-pressures that do work upon us, in the writing of literature, as in every other field of human activity. But my point is that only in literature can we possibly withstand them without much damage, thanks to our professedly free, though illiberal society. So why not make optimal use of the tool given to us and serve the cause of Truth, dearest to our hearts? By being bold and clever enough to get past the constraints or compulsions, through our artistic devices, without appearing to be odious? I know what these pressures are, and hence this suggestion of making haste slowly.

Now some of us, mercifully few, are even guiltier. They are not only afraid of being not approved, they are positively inclined to heed the inspirational calls in order to earn the approbation of the powers-that-be. The calls given by our leaders, day in and day out, to improve the society, serve the Motherland, do this and do that in the given context, so as to make our products worthwhile. It is not sufficiently realised that these are desirable modes of conduct expected of everybody. The writer has surely no superior claim of being exempted from this unwritten preamble to the social code. I won't even grant him the privilege of being amoral, any more than the man-in-the-street. But his first priority is to produce an honest

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and handsome piece of work, just as it is for a cobbler, an architect, or even a bureaucrat entrusted with a creative job. His outlook on life will surely be reflected in his works, and so let it speak for itself and do such good to the society, as it can. Thus I believe, personally, that my own fiction helps to reveal our internal selves in a manner that should make my reader sit up and think, clear the many cobwebs of his self-deception, and prompt him to be a little more genuine for the good of the world around me. This may well be a vain assumption. But have I or have I not done an honest job, and does it really look attractive? That ought to be my primary concern, and the central appeal; the rest is secondary. If I heed the siren-songs and put my cart before the horse, I would only vitiate whatever good I am called upon to do to the society, for my product would then be an act of "bad faith", a hollow artefact shorn of substance—the substance of felt emotions wedded to related thoughts—and can never deceive the discerning reader. So what matters most is my artistic integrity, the true exercise of the freedoms given to me and, yet, sought to be withheld, in the making of literature. The autonomous exercise of a talent, following the urge to express myself. Autonomous for sure, and not independent, thanks to the conditionings I cannot free myself of, as referred to earlier. But that is the best I can hope for.

The autonomy of literature as is desirable and achievable rests primarily with the writer, but not entirely. There is this imperative of communication. Communication is but a reaching out to another—the individual perception, understanding and enjoyment of another being. It was done by word of mouth in the ancient days, and so an instant rapport between the two was possible. Later came the printed word and a larger but limited audience who could be reached in person or by personal efforts. But we are now in an age when the good word needs to be spread properly by professional people, if I wish to be heard above the babel of much non-literature, and competing literature. Thus a genuine work of art is in every danger of being sidelined, or even distorted by the incompetence of these managers of communication. Worse, by their partisanship, the shenanigans of "media hype" in the guise of commercial compulsions, which can totally frustrate a writer, who is unable to reach out to them in the desired manner. I would not take long over this painful phenomenon. Let me concede straightaway that the honourable gentlemen are mostly guided by wrong signals, for which they are not to blame. Nevertheless I would implore them, as lovers of literature, to take pains, a little more than at present, to be duly discriminating

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and objective in bringing the reader and writer together so that the possibility of adding extraneous values to a writer's product at the cost of another is minimised. The communicator plays a very important and responsible role in presenting a literary work of genuine merit to the discerning reader, and he can hardly afford to ignore it.

Finally I come to the reader, at the receiving end of the creative process. For he has his own obligations, too, of freedom which he is not ordinarily aware of. The kind of freedom that must respond to the one exercised by the writer, even as he goes through a poem or a story, almost casually, in his moments of leisure. Casualness is, in itself, indicative of a certain constraint working on him, namely that he has many other and more important things to do. And he may also be tempted, later, to dispose it of with an instant reaction of "good", "bad", "rubbish" or whatever, without much thought. "Well, why not?" a reader may ask, "Need you bother about the speed of my disposals, when you should know that I belong, generally to the same class and culture, as yours and so my value-judgements are bound to be on the right lines?" Good question. But that is exactly what troubles me. Because the conditionings that have gone into my writing, as also the success I may have achieved in freeing myself of the pressures I am aware of, may well be mismatched with yours. If no poet has his meaning alone, without reference to the poets who have left the scene in the same cultural milieu, as we are apt to agree with T.S. Eliot, the "meaning" belongs to both the writer and the reader. So I ask for no more than a certain togetherness between the two of us in trying to recover and appreciate the said meaning. The value-judgements will come later, but first, I need to have an exercise in empathy on the part of my reader, as I have said earlier, joined to a conscious effort to savour of his own freedom of choice. A freedom that can be attained only by his being duly aware of the constraints that are likely to vitiate his choice, and doing his best to overcome them.

It is only this interplay of freedoms between the writer and the reader, irrespective of the latent conditionings of their psyche that can result in the autonomic effulgence of a work of art.

To sum up: Literature cannot be autonomous of the business of life. Consequently it is not divorced from other disciplines, and particularly those that profess to deal with the human conditions. Nor can it be cloistered in any "temple of learning". It has to live, breathe, and grow towards newer meanings and realizations with the passage of time, in a mutual exercise of freedoms by the writer and the reader,

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suitably aided by the middleman—such freedoms, that is, which are achievable. And as to its autonomy from the author, alas, I have to let it go with a wrench in my heart. However I hope I can live with it, and die peacefully, if I can see my literature flourish thus, beautifully, towards a consummation that is never achieved, but is always around the corner. After all, as the poet Geoffrey Gregson has said, does not all literature resound to the victories of human incompleteness? □



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LITERARY CRITICISM

POLITICS IN THE MALAYALAM NOVEL: A READING of C.R. PARAMESWARAN'S *PRAKRITINIYAMAM*

P.P. Raveendran

GONE are the days when one would plod along with the thematology of the novel in order to get at its politics. Now politics is recognized less as a function of the thematic content of a work of art than as the specific ideological connotations that the artwork acquires as it is actualized in the process of reading. Thus while early Malayalam novels like C.V. Raman Pillai's *Marthanda Varma,* Appan Thampuran's *Bhutharayar,* and K.M. Paniker's *Kerala Simham* can be treated as political novels primarily on account of their thematic reference to a political situation, recent works like O.V. Vijayan's *Dharmapuranam,* Anand's *Marubhoomikal Undakunnathu* and C.R. Parmeswaran's *Prakritiniyamam* are political for the added reason that even as they remain firmly entrenched in a political locale, their fractured texts render problematic the politics out of which they arise. Though the question cannot be studied in isolation of the mechanics of canon-formation, it is interesting to see how an artwork perpetuates itself by imposing ideological limits on its reception. The award-winning novel *Prakritiniyamam* by the young Malayalam writer C.R. Parameswaran is a case in point.

Set in a commune nicknamed "the commune of the haemorrhoidal" somewhere in Southern Kerala, *Prakritiniyamam* tells the story of the disintegration of the communist culture in Kerala, as the author perceives it. The commune which, during the 1940s was a symbol of revolutionary fervour, has over the years degenerated into a colony of middle-class complacency and noveau-riche affluence. The narrator is an intellectual who was in the vanguard of the movement in the forties, but has since fallen behind, unable to adapt himself to

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the new situation. Having been a resident of the commune right from its inception, the narrator can only watch with helplessness the gradual drift of the commune toward cultural decay and death. His fits of depression lead to spells of insanity, when he is able to recreate in his fantasy the commune of the past and the ardent dreams of its members. Parameswaran's novel is the story of these dreams set against contemporary reality.

With such inspiring material for plot, with a person of Parameswaran's mastery of the medium to plot it, it is no wonder that *Prakritiniyamam* has been hailed as a "marvellous" novel by a majority of our educated readers. After two years of its serialization in the *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, it has now in bookform gone into a second edition. It got rave reviews from critics including M. Leelavathy, which has in a sense ensured for it a place on the canon of Malayalam literature. Its selection for the best novel award for the year 1989 by the Kerala Sahitya Academy can be seen as proof of this canonization.

Indeed *Prakritiniyamam* is an outstanding achievement, especially as a writer's first novel. Artistically conceived, it has aesthetic appeal and technical virtues (except perhaps for certain flaws in the last sections of the book—the author's move in withdrawing the last chapter from the second edition seems to be intended to mask them). If these virtues should help to make this book a formal success, it can also be argued that as a work which serves to blur the line separating illusion from reality, representation from what is represented, *Prakritiniyamam* defeats itself as an art object proposing to lay bare social contradictions.

This is said not on the basis of statements that the author might have made outside the novel, but on the strength of what is stated explicitly and implicitly in the novel. Superficially the narrator in the novel appears to be a morally indignant and hypersensitive radical, who is deeply shaken by the vicious turn events have taken in the present day world. Memories of compromises that the revolutionary movement made in the past assail him every now and then. He takes great pains to resist the onslaughts of decay on himself, and to keep himself sheltered from the cultural slumming represented by the present state of the commune. When reality proves too awful for him, he escapes into the world of fantasy which he peoples with dreams of human liberation. He is reported to be insane, but his insanity is of a kind which in the earlier parts of the novel we don't recognize as insanity. This is because we know that in a world of inverted values, insanity is the best form of sanity.

Perhaps the novelist intends to communicate these and similar

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ideas, to judge by the interviews that he has given to the media. But do they get communicated in the total context of the novel? One might wonder whether they do, and the reason for this is to be traced to the historical peculiarities of the genre of the novel. These peculiarities are related to the novel form's alienation from lived experience and the ideological nature of its subject matter. The rhetorical devices employed by the writer, especially of the canonical texts, are the major means of effecting this alienation, which nevertheless do not alienate the text from the ruling ideology. Strangely enough, the same reasons, phrased differently, prompted Plato to banish artists from his ideal republic and the Puritans to dismiss theatre from their not-so-ideal territory. The point is that literature, defined as fiction, has something in it that binds it to the dominating ideology, the system of signs producing meanings and ideas in a given society. If Plato and the Puritans hoped to subvert literature's radicalism by banning the art, what they did not recognize was the irrelevance of their own excercise. For the institution of literature subverts its own radicalism. In the case of Parameswaran's novel, one must say that even as it positions itself against the cultural degeneration of contemporary life, it perpetuates the system by pandering to its ideological prejudices. Seeming to support the social forces promoting change, the novel works subliminally to defer change.

One way of explaining this apparent contradiction is to make use of the concept of an "implied reader" proposed by the West German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser.* Conceived as a counterpart of Wayne C. Booth's notion of "implied author", the concept allows us to account for the reader's role in producing meanings. The implied reader can be described as a "standpoint" which facilitates real readers to assemble the meaning of a literary text. While in this sense it has an active role in the production of meaning, it functions passively as a work's "structure of appeal." The concept thus incporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text and the reader's actualization of this potential through the act of reading.

How does the implied reader control the interpretation of a text? More specifically, how does a reader of *Prakritiniyamam* actualize the novel's potential meaning? One way of looking at this problem is to

* For theoretical details see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading : A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London : Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), especially pages 27-38. Also see *The Implied Reader : Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Backett* (Baltimore and London : Johns Hopkins UP, 1974) for Iser's own readings of selected literary texts.

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assume that the implied reader is the voice of the ideology in the text. It is this that helps limit the meaning of a work of art which theoretically has infinite semantic possibilities. Let me briefly outline two instances where the ruling ideology covers up the gaps—contradictions and discrepancies—in *Prakritiniyamam* in order to make it aesthetically appealing. As mentioned above, the narrator's insanity in *Prakritiniyamam* in the novel's early sections is of a positive kind, and this is so partly because the narrative develops quite coherently and logically. The narrative puts the reader in no doubt about the real state of mind of the narrator. But this confidence of the reader gets a jolt in chapter 12 when a kind of fragmentation develops in the narrative in the course of the narrator's conversation with a dead friend's daughter. The reader would now wonder if he had been correct in regarding the narrator's putative insanity as a sign of sensibility and humanity. Later in the next chapter when the therapist arrives to treat the narrator the reader will be prepared to recognize the therapist, and not the narrator, as the voice of sanity. The narrator has to be cured of his illness after all. This is one instance of ideology getting mediated through the novel. The story becomes the novel only when the reader is reassured of its fictional status, and in the case of *Prakritiniyamam* this happens only when the narrator becomes "really" insane.

The second example is related to the symbolic use of the narrator's wife's dreams. Frequent references are made in the text to the couple's childless state and the narrator's possible impotence. This is linked with the narrator's inability to enter into any kind of fruitful intercourse with the world. Descriptions of human liberation in the novel are accompanied by images of male power in a language also suggestive of male virulence. This ideological intervention becomes more conspicuous towards the end of the novel when the wife's conception is imagined as happening in a context replete with religious symbols. These are encodings of ideology in the text of Parameswaran's novel which will be decoded as such by its readers. Far from laying bare social contradictions what the novel does is to repress them.

To sum up, the receptive possibilities of a work of art are determined by the formal expectations built into the structure of a literary genre, which in turn are governed by the society's ideology. An artwork, by virtue of its being the member of a historical genre, imposes on itself perceptual limits which can be transgressed only by denying its own existence. This is the politics of aesthetics. The reception accorded to Parameswaran's novel, in the final analysis, is a vindication of this politics. □

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A VOYAGE INTO THE DEPTHS

Purabi Panwar

THE MIRACLE AND OTHER STORIES by Manoj Das; Sterling, 1993; pp. 128; Rs. 50.

"I have now read the stories of Manoj Das with very great pleasure. He will certainly take a place on my shelves beside the stories of R.K. Narayan. I imagine Orissa is far from Malgudi, but there is the same quality in his stories with perhaps an added mystery" wrote the late Graham Greene to Dick Batstone of Batstone Books, United Kingdom, who published *The Submerged Valley and Other Stories* by Manoj Das in 1986.

After reading *The Miracle and Other Stories*, the book under review, one responds in much the same way. The human quality of the stories with the socio-cultural milieu of rural Orissa, is sure to appeal to a sensitive reader. This reviewer has come across some of these stories before, but a second reading often brings out some of the finer points one has missed earlier.

A few stories in the collection explore the realm of the supernatural, but not in the way stereotyped ghost stories do. The very first story called 'The Shadow' explores a very unusual relationship between Anjan Sharma, a very talented professor, and his shadow. After reading it one invariably looks back for one's shadow and feels relieved to find it close by. In 'Son and Father' the nameless boy who approaches the forest guest house "at the speed of a shooting star" and rushes with the wind "under the focus of a dazzling outburst of clouds, as if eager to catch hold of a string of lightning and swing up to the clouds!" appears to be the spirit of creativity that eludes the self-conscious litterateur. It is a fascinating study in contrast: the successful writer full of his own importance as he sits in the forest guest house meant for top officials, wrapped in his expensive Kashmiri shawl (and his pride) and the boy who is inseparable from the elements. The writer wants to

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communicate with the boy but his worldly trappings get in the way. Das makes his point quite clear without seeming to moralise.

'The Red Red Twilight' is perhaps the most frightening story in the collection. It starts off on an eerie note: "There were uncanny sunsets when the horizon turned ghastly red. If one had to cross the meadow then, all alone, when the erratic breeze carried the smoke of corpses burning at some distance, one felt like weeping—more so if the water of the lonely pond with the huge old trees surrounding it looked awfully red and enchanted." The reader feels a supernatural presence. Was Kumudini murdered or forced to commit suicide? In either case her father-in-law, the old exorcist, was responsible, and the spirit of the dead woman chooses to take revenge on him in the most terrible way one can think of. The theme of being possessed by spirits is carried on in another story, 'The Interlopers' but somehow this reviewer does not find it so terrifying.

"Once his name was on the tips of a thousand tongues. But that is past. I don't blame people for forgetting Bimbadhar Bishoi, for today we are obliged to retain in our memory many more names than our forefathers were required to do...the names of numerous officials and big, medium and small leaders, film and sport stars of regional, national and international importance as well as the news-announcers on the TV and the radio." Gentle humour is Manoj Das' forte and the way he narrates the story of Bishoi's thwarted ambitions is sure to make one smile, at the same time feel a little sorry for the would-be politician whose career is ruined just when the prospect seems brightest, all because of a thoughtless action on his part. 'Two Slippers and a Soul' mixes irreverence with just the right degree of profundity and the result is delightful. One is reminded of an earlier story 'Mystery of the Missing Cap' in which the episode of the visiting minister's Gandhi cap being stolen by a half domesticated monkey changes the course of his life as well as that of his host whose lifelong ambition was to become an MLA. Politicians are often Das's targets; he cannot resist attacking their hypocrisy and pomposity.

Changing social patterns bring changing values in their wake, but certain basic human values remain the same, or at least they should. So the impoverished zamindar sells the gold covering of his walking stick to award a gold medal to the ageing actor, forty years after he had promised to do so. 'The Gold Medal' is one of the most touching stories in the collection because it brings out the best in the two leading characters, at a crucial point of time.

Sometimes the reverse can happen. A crisis can bring out the worst in a person, specially if it happens to be someone as ruthless

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as Tara, "The dancer, but the one who found making others dance around her a great fun. Whoever happened to step into her aura had no other go than whirling and swirling almost in the manner of an insect around a flame till it burnt its wings." 'Pages from the Diary of Raghuvir Singh (1810-1880)' resurrects scenes of feudal decadence from the last century in which uncontrolled passion and jealousy obliterate all human emotions just as "...the thicker darkness that followed the flash seemed to blot out the castle."

Manoj Das's stories cover a wide range of subjects. "But the most noteworthy trait of his works is his powerful penetration into the subtle realities beneath the surface realities" in the words of a critic. Sometimes the penetration can have a comic aftereffect as in 'The Different Man.' Chowdhury loves meddling in other people's affairs and a young man "in an exquisite suit and glittering shoes...whose glistening hair was in a total disarray" attracts his attention in an airport lounge. He tries ticking the young men off but the latter is not prepared to listen to him and bystanders call him mad. Chowdhury is furious and as the young man with dishevelled hair is about to get into his car and start it he rushes to him and catches hold of his hair. The young man drives off quickly, appearing to be a different person. And the cat is out of the bag. "Chowdhury gave out a mild shriek when his eyes returned to his own head which for a moment looked alien to himself like that of an assassin, for it held something like a part of a head a complete wig marked by a profusion of glistening dark hair!" The shock cures Chowdhury of his meddlesome habits "Silently he apologised to the young man and all the others concerned." How one wishes all meddlesome persons could be taught such lessons!

Nature can make or unmake a person in the most unexpected way. A person at the peak of his career can meet with an ignominious end when all his power and money are of no use. Avani the politician in 'The Assault' realises this, when an unpublicised visit to a widow to pressurise her to part with her land (of course "He would be kind to her and offer a geneorous price for her land.") ends in a fiasco. Even before he can reach the widow's hut, he is confronted with a pair of yellow eyes. "The creature facing him was a billy goat, huge and strong. Its head reminded him of a demoniac wizard in the *Arabian Nights*. He could read in the beast's eyes an uncanny resolution to knock him down and pound and pulverise him if possible." Nemesis is never far behind, as the ancients often said. As he rolls down the mound ... "with each turn of his body was peeled off a certain value he cherished, each collision with a shrub or a clod of hardened earth

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demolished one of the numerous monuments of his achievement."

A miracle can never be forced; it has to happen on its own. Do the devotees in 'The Miracle' realise this? This reviewer feels that Das has purposely left the end of the story open. It is up to the reader to believe or disbelieve in Brajagopal's spirituality. Perhaps there can be no absolute answer, as in life. Most of us have come across persons like Brajagopal and not known what to make of them. One realises that the reason one relates to Das's stories is that they are close to life, close to what one experiences or might experience. This gives them an authenticity. Also Das's handling of characters and situations has a depth which no reader can miss. All this gives the stories their special appeal and they haunt the reader long after one has finished reading them. □

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THE COURTESAN AND THE INDIAN NOVEL

Vinay Lal

UMRAO JAN ADA; COURTESAN OF LUCKNOW Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa, Translated by Khushwant Singh and M.A. Husaini, Reprint ed., Hyderabad, Disha Books, 1993, xiii + 158 pp. Paperback, Rs. 70.

THE NAUTCH GIRL: A NOVEL Hasan Shah. Translated by Quarratulain Hyder, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992, 104 pp, Paperback, Rs. 45.

THE novel in India is conventionally thought to have emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century. The year of the Rebellion, 1857, also saw the publication of *Alaler Gharer Dulal*, upon which Bankimchandra Chatterji, who himself holds a lofty place in the development of the novel in India, lavished praise as a "beautifully written" work. The contemporary assessment of the merits of this work has been more restrained, but nonetheless *Alaler Gharer Dulal* is thought to occupy a unique position in the history of Indian, and certainly Bengali, literature as "the first work in Bengali which can be described as a novel."[1] As in England, where the rise of the novel is associated with the industrial revolution and emergence of a new sensibility, so in India novel's beginnings are said to be linked to the penetration of the market economy into the countryside, the emergence of a middle class, and the advent of other forces of 'modernization' and 'Westernization'. "The growth of the novel", Humayun Kabir was to write in his monograph on the Bengali novel, "is associated with the development of the sceintific temper and the emergence of the middle class."[2] With the consolidation of British rule, and the transition of authority from the East India Company with its errant ways to the Crown, supposedly the very embodiment of the 'rule of law', both the rulers and the ruled could devote more attention to the much vaunted ethic of 'improvement', and "life became more settled and conventional". Kabir ventured on to say that "the new middle classes stress individuality and human dignity", and presumably meant to indicate that in India, as in England, the novel would be a carrier of these values.

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There is a great deal in the conventional account of the emergence of the novel in India that one could dispute. Life may indeed have become more "settled" with the passing of the Rebellion of 1857-58, insofar as deviations from stated policy were rendered less erratic and the administration assumed a more even (though perhaps more evenly oppressive) note. However, as Veena Oldenburg has shown in her study of the making of colonial Lucknow, the post-Mutiny period was characterized by the emergence of British control over the most intimate aspects of the everyday lives of ordinary Indians. The relative indulgence with which the 'natives' had been allowed to continue with their customs, lest they should take umbrage at the interference in their modes of living, was to be rendered a thing of the past. The 'civilizing mission' was now pursued with a greater vigour, and in Lucknow this led the British to introduce legislation affecting the most private aspects of the lives of Indians, such as the manner and mode of defecation and the burial of the dead.[3] So just how "settled" could life have become when the rule of the colonizers was to infiltrate the interior and private spaces of Indians? Similarly, with respect to the thesis that the growth of the novel owed a great deal to the development of a market economy, while one can scarcely doubt that new forms of commerce arose with the advent and expansion of British rule, giving rise—especially in the port cities of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras—to a whole new class of shipping agents, customs officials, middlemen, and merchants, it has been argued that colonialism may in fact have retarded the growth of Indian industry.

Whatever the force of the sociological explanation in helping us to understand the growth of the novel in India, it has also been argued that by the mid-nineteenth century English novels were widely available in India, and for this we have the testimony of writers like Bankim himself. The novels of Walter-Scott and Edward Bulwer Lytton may not have been as eagerly awaited in India as they were in Great Britain, but they were nonetheless to leave an indelible mark on the Indian novel. In short, the novel in India must, on the conventional view, be an alien import. However, Qurratulain Hyder, who is thought by some to be the foremost novelist of Urdu in the world today, and has now made available into English what she describes as the "first known modern Indian novel", appears to have little use for this argument. She states in her foreword to *The Nautch Girl*, a translation of *Nashtar*, literally "Surgeon's Knife", that her "research" revealed to her "an astounding fact": Hasan Shah, who was apparently a young man when he wrote the novel in 1790, is stated to have "not know[n] any English", for "otherwise with his penchant for detail he would have mentioned it". (p. 8). It is not clear what the nature of

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Qurratulain Hyder's "research" has been, but one hopes that it is more than inference.

It is in Persian, which then was still the language of the literati, that Hasan Shah penned his tale of a dancing or nautch girl. The book remained unpublished until 1893, when it appeared in an Urdu translation, and it is from this version, the original now being extinct, that Qurratulain Hyder has given us an English translation, thereby rescuing from oblivion this sadly neglected work. The translation, however, is abridged, all the more surprising in view of the importance that Hyder ascribes to the *Nautch Girl*. Hasan Shah was, as he himself says, a man of respectable even noble birth, although the family's fortunes had suffered somewhat in the political turmoil following the invasions of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali, the Rohilla and Sikh wars, and the decline of the Mughal empire. He took up a position as aide-de-camp to "Ming Saheb", described as "a nephew of the celebrated General Coote" (p. 11). Also in Ming's employ was a troupe of dancing girls and musicians, and it is with a member of this troupe, the nautch girl Khanum Jan, that Hasan Shah fell in love. His love is reciprocated, and though there is an enormous gulf between the courtesan and the clerk from a bourgeois Muslim family, they have a secret wedding. Such a transgression would have been unthinkable, but for the fact that the entire atmosphere of the camp was already conducive to the flaunting of social norms; even then, Hasan Shah is unable to inform Ming of the union he has contracted with Khanum Jan, and eventually the terms of his employment lead to their separation. When at last Hasan Shah is able to effect his departure from Ming's camp, so that he can join his wife, who had left with her troupe to seek employment elsewhere, he finds upon his arrival that Khanum Jan, unable to endure the pain of separation, has succumbed to her sickness.

Hasan Shah had available to him an indigenous genre, the *masnavi*, for the expression of romantic love and the pain of lovers, but *The Nautch Girl* goes far beyond the confessional mode. What makes *The Nautch Girl* an arresting work, in the first instance, is the mode in which it is written. The boat journey which Hasan Shah takes to join his wife is the flight of one soul in search of a like soul, the journey of the lover in search of the beloved, and as we know from the use of such imagery in bhakti poetry, a journey of this kind is fraught with hazards: the sea can be stormy, the navigator may be unskilled, the boat may sink from a leak; and when at all the boat appears to have reached the shore safely, at the very last moment it hits a rock. The path of love is just as tortuous as the road to God.

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All this is there, one might say, in *The Nautch Girl*, but Hasan Shah invests his account of the jouney with fictional devices that have a most poignant effect. There is the love letter from Khanum, tied to a bit of driftwood (p. 74); then there is the loss of a shoe at Khanum's tombstone, where Hasan Shah, having gone into a frenzy, fell into a pit (p. 87); and finally a conversation between Hasan Shah and his dead wife (p. 88). Hasan Shah certainly appears to have understood some of the possibilities of the novel; dialogue assumes a centrality in *The Nautch Girl*, and the narrative is pushed forward by having incidents which took place in the narrator's absence recounted by other witnesses.

The figure and characterization of Khanum Jan, however, are what eventually make the *Nautch Girl* a compelling work. It is not insignificant that the heroine of the first Indian 'novel' should be a dancing girl, a member of a disreputable profession. In that capacity, Khanum Jan could indulge in behaviour denied to women of other classes, and most emphatically to upper-class women. She did not, for instance, observe *purdah*, while admitting that she found it "distressing to go about unveiled" (p. 63). She is more compelling still as a woman of considerable wit and irony, resolute in her determination, mindful of her dignity and independence. Of course Hasan Shah places her squarely within the framework of patriarchy: thus Khanum Jan appears as the exponent of the view that men cannot be held to promises of fidelity, "because it is almost impossible for a man (and only a man) to remain monogamous all his life" (p. 44). As an Indian woman, she will tolerate such lapses on her husband's part as might take place. But Khanum Jan is not hereby compromised, for clearly Hasan Shah did not intend to depict her as a feminist; rather, she evokes certain possibilities and limits, and appears as the embodiment of a love that is freely chosen.

However, a nautch girl's freedom to choose her lover can never have been unambiguous, as Mirza Mohammed Hadi Ruswa's novel on Umrao Jan, the famous courtesan of Lucknow, amply suggests. Ruswa himself described the circumstances under which *Umrao Jan Ada* came to be written; one evening, at a gathering of his friends where poetry was being read and discussed, a woman from the next door apartment was heard to voice her appreciation of a couplet that Ruswa had recited. Ruswa then had a word with her; she was persuaded to join the group, where she recited a verse whose last lines were:

> Who will listen to the tale of my woeful heart?
> Far and wide have I wandered on the face of this earth
> And I have much to impart.

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At Ruswa's prompting, Umrao related her life to him over several sittings, and those narratives Ruswa committed to writing; it is even possible, as Susie Tharu has suggested,[4] that Umrao Jan herself authored the work, but allowed its appearance under Ruswa's name. It is in Umrao's words, in any case, that the narrative was to find shape.

Whatever the authorship of the work, there is scarcely any doubt that Umrao had a large hand in the characterization of her own life. She had a command over words and her easy facility with poetry won her a following among the aristocratic literati of Lucknow: with her couplets she stole their hearts. Kidnapped by a ruffian who sought to exact revenge for the term he had served in jail on the strength of testimony given by her father, Umrao was brought to Lucknow, and eventually sold into the establishment of Madame Khanum Jan. It was at this house of prostitution that she was to live out the greater part of her life; it was there that she was transformed from Ameeran to Umrao. Luckily, her education was entrusted to a Maulvi who combined his refined tastes and not inconsiderable learning with a real affection for Umrao. "From the shapeless log of wood that I was" Umrao was to say, "he chiselled out a civilised being"; it was the Maulvi who endowed Umrao with the confidence that allowed her not merely to sit with cultured company but to "command the respect and attention of wealthy aristocrats" (p. 19). Most significantly, the Maulvi nurtured her interest in poetry until it had "developed into a passion", and that was the passion with which she was to etch the story of her life indelibly onto the social and cultural imagination of Lucknow.

As Khushwant Singh and M.A. Husaini, whose endeavours have brought *Umrao Jan Ada* to readers of English, point out in their introduction, Umrao Jan Ada conveys "a flavour of all that was Lucknow—its language, its poetry and music, and the way of life of its citizens" (p. xi). This was the city that perfected the culture of the *pan* and where everyone aspired to be a poet. The very decadence of Lucknow was not merely aristocratic but inimitable: as Premchand was to suggest this culture in his short story, "The Chess Players", two *nawabs* continued to indulge their mad passion in chess as Lucknow fell to the British and their own wives became altogether disaffected with them.

Umrao Jan undoubtedly evokes some of the ambience for which Lucknow was renowned, but it is the complex characterization of Umrao and the life that she led which makes the novel memorable and significant. In Ruswa's rendering of Umrao, the courtesan is most candid about her profession; though it may well be a woman's

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desire to be loved, a desire that swells as she grows older, it is not given to a whore to live out this desire (p. 38). A tart's only friends is her money; she is no one's wife, and if she is foolish enough to give her love to some man, she does so at the considerable risk of jeopardizing her livelihood (p. 56). When Ruswa interrogates Umrao about the place of love in her life, she is quite forthright in her pronunciation of the view that in her profession "love is a current coin. Whenever we want to ensnare anyone we pretend to fall in love with him." As she adds, no man ever loved her, nor did she ever love any man (p. 59). While Umrao's relations with the Nawab Sultan appear to belie her own profession of indifferent engagement with men, her surrender could not have been complete lest her very livelihood should have been endangered, for where was the man who would openly risk his lot with her? A 'respectable' man had a home to which he could return, and a wife to embrace, but what was the net of safety around Umrao? Whatever her fame as a singer of laments and as a dancer who could entrance men as much by the style and substance of her poetic deliveries as by her movements, she would perforce be judged by the refinement of the pleasures that were hers to offer in bed. God might well forgive streetwalkers who repent, Umrao was to reflect, but "good women never" do so. They are "suspicious and contemptuous of women who go astray", for "however lovely a character" these good women may have, and however good housekeepers these women might be, they find to their great chagrin that men "will fall for a street woman who may have nothing in the way of looks, and may be wanting in all other qualities as well" (p. 119). Loathed by "good women", and reduced ultimately by their patrons, and clients to tools of their pleasure, what could these courtesans, howsoever beautiful and talented, hope for by way of some secure place within the socio-economic and cultural fabric of Indian society?

Ruswa's novel takes us, then, through the turbulences of Umrao's life. Although the dislocations in Indian society created by the advent of British rule, and later by the penetration of this rule into the countryside and the consequent resistance, have been the subject of innumerable studies, the impact of such developments on subaltern classes like nautch-girls and courtesans has scarcely received any attention. As Khanum Jan in Hasan Shah's novel was to find that her livelihood was largely dependent upon the British, so Umrao comes to the recognition, as Lucknow became the imaginative and symbolic centre of the Rebellion of 1857, that the patronage of her clients had a considerable relationship to the rise or decline of British fortunes.

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Umrao was to become a victim of the "grand catastrophe" (p. 101), and though the establishment which had been her home was to be looted and become rather dilapidated over the next few years, the anarchy of the times could not dull Umrao's spirits or diminish her zest for life. Umrao emerges finally as a woman with formidable reservoirs of strength, almost ponderously reflective as she slips into old age, about the strange twists of destiny that carried her from the confined world of the hearth to a realm where, though the regimes of power were just as portent, she could experience herself as an agent. It is this wild horse of ambiguity that Umrao Jan, the novel as much as the character, rides with admirable candor.

It is to the question of the relationship of the emergence of the novel to the evocative and strong characterization of women, to what might loosely even be termed a proto-feminism, that we must finally turn our gaze. Is it merely coincidental that what has been described, perhaps with considerable license, as the first novel in any 'Indian' language, and also that one of the earliest novels in another Indian tongue, Urdu, should both have been centred around strong women characters, all the more compelling in view of the fact that they are shown pursuing a 'dishonorable' profession? Or is it arguably the case that the novel, the preeminent form of the social narrative, is less hostile than other genres of literature, not to mention traditional social science, both to women and the marginalized? The latter supposition at least provides a more forceful basis for interrogating the social origins of the novel. If the Indian novel mirrors the socio-economic and cultural dislocations induced by colonialism, it also struggled to map the place of certain subaltern classes within the new dispensation. By according women a voice, in howsoever attenuated a form, the novel, as both the *Nautch Girl* and *Umrao Jan Ada* suggest, may well have contributed to the reformulation of important social questions. □

Notes :

1 T.W. Clark, "Bengali Prose Fiction Up to Bankimchandra", in T.W. Clark, ed., *The Novel in India: Its Birth and Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 37.
2 Humayun Kabir, *The Bengali Novel* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1968), p. 5.
3 Nee Veena T. Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877* (New Jersey: Prindeton University Press, 1984), especially chapters 3 & 4.
4 Lecture at Columbia University, New York, April 1993, on "Woman Writing in India."

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JOURNALS

Biblio, Vol. 1, No. 2, Ed. Shamlal, The Business India Group, 10, Pearl Mansion, 91, Maharshi Karve Road, Bombay-400 020; Rs. 20, Annual Sub: Rs. 200. This is the second issue of *Biblio* a review of books published from Bombay. This issue carries two brief yet interesting conversations—with Alvin Toffler and Guy Sorman. It has taken up for review serious works from various fields like anthropology, history, dramaturgy, fiction, travel writing, biography, lifestyle studies and poetry. The contributors include Dilip Chitre, Mukul Kesavan, Eunice De Souza, Ravinder Kumar, Partha Chatterjee, Shamlal, Dilip Padgaonkar, Arvind N. Das, S. Prasannarajan and others. Most of the reviews are serious; there are trite ones too like the one on Oe Kenzaburo's novel by Christopher C. Benninger. The issue also features S. Prasannarajan's essay on contemporary fiction and Ravinder Kumar's on the concept of tolerance besides some very ordinary poems by C.P. Surendran, an article on feminist publishing by Urvashi Butalia and an appendix of new and forthcoming titles. A fascinating addition to review magazines in India.

The Brown Critique, Nos. 4-6, Ed. Gayatri Majumdar Bhatt, 003, C/6 Bhagirathi Lok Gram, Kalyan (E), Thane-421306, Maharashtra, Rs. 15/-, Annual Sub: Rs. 60. This is a new literary quarterly from Bombay. The current issue features Indian English poetry by young as well as established poets from Robin S. Ngangom to Anjum Hasan, translations of poems by Tagore, Shakti Chattopadhyay and K. Satchidanandan and an essay on Tony Morrison by Veena Singh. Another tidy little magazine with accent on poetry.

Contour, Vol. 2. Nos. 1-2, Ed. B.S.M. Murty, English Literary Forum, Mohanpur, Punaichak, Patna 800023, Rs. 50, Annual Rs. 50. *Contour* is basically an academic journal devoted to English literary studies by Indian teachers and scholars. This issue has articles on Thornton Wilder's moral quest, Milton's Satan, Pinter's vision, Byron and the Indian ethos, Paul Scott and

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India and D.H. Lawrence's parables besides essays on poetics by Sachidananda Mohanty, Amarendra Kumar and Munji Singh, book reviews and poems.

Inner Voice, Nos. 1-2, Ed. Niranjan Misra, Church Road, Parlakhemundi, Gajapati Dt. Orissa-761200, Annual Rs. 50. This 60 page journal has a lot of poems, mostly by beginners besides an article by Bipin Patsani and two book reviews.

Word Plus, No. 1, Ed. P. Chandrasekharan Nair, P.B. No. 5504 Ramanilayam, Palayam, Trivandrum 695001; Rs. 10. *World Plus* is a new journal whose inaugural number carries a symposium on information technology besides translations of poems by Ayyappa Paniker and V. Madhusoodanan Nair, a short story by Manju Kak and an article 'Sex, Text, Politics—Women's Writing in India: Problems of Reading' by K. Satchidanandan. The symposium participants include well-known names like Ashok Mitra, Javad K. Hassan, N. Vittal, Rubaiyat Ali, R.V.G. Menon, L. Kannan and P. Govinda Pillai who among them discuss the different aspects of the technological society and the impact of the media on the people. □



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Anantha Murthy, U.R. See *IL* issue no. 165.

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Dasari, Amarendra. See *IL* issue no. 166.

Dave, Harindra (1930-1995) : Gujarati poet, novelist, playwright, critic and essayist; with several published works; recipient of Sahitya Akademi award for *Hayati* in 1978, Ranjeetram Gold Medal and Aurobindo Medal in 1982. Add. : 3/38,

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working with Orient Longman. Add: Lead Editor, Orient Longman Ltd, 365 Sahednagar, Bhubaneswar-751007, Orissa.

Saxena, Sarveshwar Dayal (1927-1983) : Well-known Hindi poet and short story writer; has also published poems and plays for children; with several poetry collections; recipient of Sahitya Akademi award for his poetry collection *Khutiyon Par Tange Log* in 1983.

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Sri Shantinath Desai has informed us that his story 'The Mediators' in *Indian Literature,* 168 was translated by K. Raghavendra Rao and not by the author himself. The typescript did not mention the translator's name. The unintentional error is regretted.

—EDITOR

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Speaking of Urdu

WE are living at a time when the question of Urdu is being communalised and politicised both in India and Pakistan. The partition led to a reorganisation of the Urdu writing communities and the Urdu reading public in important ways. Much like Hindi, Urdu too was never confined to one province or state in India. It was not exclusive to any community: it also co-existed with other languages like Hindi, Punjabi, Kashmiri and others, in a typically Indian multilingual situation. Writers in these provinces either wrote in one language or chose to write in two or three; but in their social intercourse they were almost always bi-lingual or tri-lingual. Faiz and Amrita Pritam had no difficulties in co-existing in the same region even while belonging to different communities and writing in different languages. Premchand was bi-lingual, Rajinder Singh Bedi and Krishan Chander came from Hindu or Sikh backgrounds; the Progressive Writers' Movement found its allies in all languages and communities; this was true also of the Modernists who broke away from the Progressives. The Partition led to a considerable exodus of Urdu writers from various regions of India into Pakistan. The demographic fragmentation of the Urdu writing and reading communities itself was tragic enough; in addition the debates now began to take on a communal colour without any rational historical basis. The communalists on both sides

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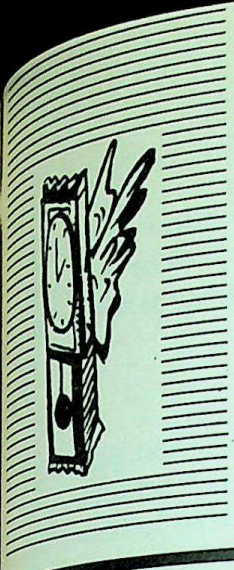
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were keen to develop an artificial divide and a debate between Urdu and Hindi, as if they represented different communities. Urdu spoken as first language only by a small minority in Pakistan was declared Pakistan's national language while it also began to be more and more Persianised, thus obliterating its common links with Hindi. This was the beginning of a coercive cultural homogenization in Pakistan while a similar process was also taking place on this side of the border with Hindustani being marginalised and a highly Sanskritised version of Hindi being promoted through the media. The vital links, both in terms of sensibility and of vocabulary, between Hindi and Urdu thus began to get snapped, leading to a dangerous cultural amnesia, a snapping of roots, a forgetfulness about the common stock of oral traditions, their shared sensibilities and creative exchanges and dialogues between the two literatures that had continued well even into the recent past.

Tragic as these developments are, creative writers both in India and Pakistan have managed to keep Urdu literature alive, untainted by the controversies so that you can still find a Pakistani writer like Intizar Hussain, elaborating the subcontinent's common tradition in his fiction while poets in Pakistan like N.M. Rasheed or Meeraji share a common sensibility with their counterparts in India. Writers like Balwant Singh, Surender Prakash, Balraj Manra, Joginder Paul or Zafar Pyami who have dominated Urdu fiction in the last quarter-century are no more 'Hindu' or 'Sikh' writers than Faiz or Manto were 'Muslim' writers. They are simply Urdu writers who happened to be born in different communities. In contemporary India where Urdu is divorced from the principal processes of social reproduction and is almost restricted to the domain of literature, there is the real danger of Urdu literature surrendering to the entertainment-industry and developing a kind of lifeless and imitative aestheticism full of stock expressions, expected reflexes and clichés. If, however, Urdu literature in India still retains its vitality and creative agility, it is thanks to its great exponents in the country, like Akhtar-ul Iman, Qurratulain Hyder, Ismat Chughtai and others. Our attempt in this special issue is not to represent the whole scene, which may be too ambitious for one issue of a journal to attempt, but to present some specimens of the excellent Urdu writing, especially in fiction and poetry, being done in India today, knowing full well that this is only one part of contemporary Urdu literature some of whose great exponents live across the border. We wish to particularly thank M. Asaduddin, Naqi Hussain Jafri, Balraj Komal and Anisur Rahman besides all the contributors to this issue who have together made it possible. □

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Firaq Gorakhpuri

MIDNIGHT

The dark trees are now their own shadows
Mute stalwarts rising from the earth to the stars
A deep feeling of being lost prevails whichever way we may look
Gloomily burning lamps, one after the other, flutter their eyelids
There are others who wait for their turn
Reflected in the moonlight mirror
Is a living dream of happy colourful sights
The yawning stars in the sky, any moment now, may drop asleep.

2

The *paan*-shops are still open here and there
The jingle of large bells of vehicles
Still drowsily roams about on roads
Every *singhar* tree stands quiet, bathed in dew
Like a bride weighed down by the fragrance of her own coyness
This wave of light, this rich open night
It appears, as if, a white lotus is blossoming out
How far, possibly, shall be the Russian columns from Berlin?
Someone is casting the midnight spell
The wine of being glances through the flask of the unknown
The midnight scene has endowed the fair one with a drunken charm
The blessedness of the stream lies in the tickling lotus-caress.

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3

This bed of passion, the prince, the softly rising song
The delicate glimmering of the eye-lotus
The ecstasy of flesh
The thick shade of indulgent eye-lids
The glowing fingers of the moon and stars
Have set tingling nature's heart strings
Songs will fill the air now
It's time to forsake sleep and rise.

4

The moon-beams kiss them again and again
Kumudini flowers have blossomed in the midst of the stream
How beautiful this world would be if none was poor or destitute here!
The sounds of crickets intermittently rise
There is a slight rustling in the henna-screens
A silent whizzing has filled the air
It seems the universe has had some sleep.

5

The colourful fish sleep underneath water
They do not frisk about and wink in fun in the courtyard pond
The *gurhal* flowers on branches have drooped their heads
As live, glowing cinders may suddenly grow lifeless, cold
Is it moonlight or a rising ocean of bliss.
It's man only who is in distress in this world.

6

A sparrow flies around the moon
Like a boat set in turbulent motion by whirlpool of light
Or a dream of a new order, or death of an old one
May grow in a poet's heart
Wherefrom does the *madhumalti* fragrance rise
It seems hundreds of fairies, with scented water
Have generously bathed the world around
Or damsels from the wilds, with unusual coquettish charm
Have let their hair down, all in a go
While frolicking on swings

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There is no news of the revolution
That stars waited with baited breath
Their hearts now beat and ears expectantly listen.

7

This living universe, this moonlit night
This solitude, this mystry of sadness
The sound of bluish wafts of softly flowing wind
Is whispering of the dead, hiding somewhere afar
This night is the bland, colourless smile of death
The ashen scenes are all tearful
Even the eyes of cold, dim light are half closed in sleep
Are stars in the sky a shroud of tears
That covers the universe?
Life turns from one side to the other
In darkness of night.
The midnight spell has grown profounder now
When will be the war finally over?
I feel it's already one o'clock, past midnight.

8

The flowers have covered their faces with dew drops
The smile on lips of buds seems to have dropped asleep
On their lips
The fair *sunbul* does not shake her tresses now
The bounds of midnight solitude are unknown
The revolution is, perhaps, not far now
Caravans seem to be moving in the dim light
The midnight silence is, in fact, the muted sound of their footfalls
The midnight spell has grown profounder now.

9

A new earth, a new sky, a new universe
New stars, new rotations, new revolutions, new days and nights
An ambience of waiting
From the earth to the sky
A cloud of dust in the pale air
Life, a death-like disorder all around
Is it a wave of smoke or pulse-beats

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Of half-lit spaciousness
The age, we live in, has lost all drive
And now stagnates in decay
This faint, lifeless glow
Comes from perspiring, dying order of moments
The universe has drowned itself
Into its ownself
May, perhaps, emerge again in glory
From its own womb
Like a snake shed its own skin
And in ecstatic abondon wave its hood.

10

The moon-beams dance in the cold air.
Light showers kiss the cups of wine,
The wave of innocent forgetfulness, the languorousness of flesh
Breathing, heavy with sleep, eyes inebriated, drunk.
Now come and repose cosily cuddled in my arms,
Close your eyes and lose yourself in me. □

Translated by Balraj Komal

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Sahir Ludhianvi

TO THE YOUTH OF MY AGE

Stars that had been the object
Of many an age's restless yearnings,
Oft overwhelmed us by their height
Or deterred us by vast horizons,
Made us forlorn,
Inspired our songs with
Celestial music
Those heavenly bodies, the distant stars,
They that remained unexplored,
Guiding the explorers.
The offsprings of light, the princelings of space,
Those eternal masters of our fates,
The perennial abode of broken hearts,
The guide-saints of the wearied caravans,
The objects of love of the adolescent youth,
The gems of a necklace the mistresses sought,
The bright flowers, lovers desired to pluck,
To be spread for the bride or decked in her nuptial bed,
The idol makers sought to worship
The distant beauties coming within reach,
With whom the singers desired to tune their voices
Whom the poets aspired to image in their verses,
That remained countless despite efforts to count,
That never came down to the terrestial domain
Away and far from our reach,
Always glancing with majestic disdain
O! the youth of my age—
The realm of those fantastic stars,
Is the offering to you of the new age.
The passion which hitherto controlled the water and the fire
Is now taking tribute
from the vast space.

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To my contemporaries and those who follow
Let the gift of our age
Be conducive to you
I look to the time
When you traverse the space for the sake of your love
Or your love would chase you through the space.

TAJ MAHAL

To you, my love, the Taj may be a manifestation of love,
The celebrated mausoleum, an object of adoration,
But someother *rendezvous*, my love.

What do we, the poor of the Earth, have to do in the royal courts?
The place that bears the imprints of imperial authority
Is of no use to us.

You should have seen, my love, the remains of stately might
Concealed in the memorial of the symbol of love.
Enamoured of the relics of the dead kings, my love,
Why don't you look at your own cottage.

Numberless persons have loved their mistresses
Who may doubt the sincerity of their passion?
But they did not have the means to immortalize their love,
Because they too were destitutes like us.

The monuments of magnificence, their ramparts and fortresses,
The edifice of the glory of the emperors absolute,
Are naught but cancers in the chest of time, Old, perennial,
The blood of mine and your ancestors.

My love, they too had passions sincere,
Whose hands have given it shape and grandeur,
The graves of their loves bear no epitaph
Nor a lamp ever lit to remember them.

The garden-tomb on the bank of Jamuna, the memorial,
Its ornate facade, the arches, the niche *excellent*
All this is only a display of an emperor's wealth
To scorn the love of the poor
Someother *rendezous*, my love.

Translated by Naqi Husain Jafri

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Akhtar-ul Iman

THE BOY

On the hills beyond hamlets in the east,
Sometimes in mango orchards, as on dykes,
In lake-waters, in lanes
Sometimes amidst half-clad merry-making urchins,
At dawn, twilight, in the darkness of the night;
Sometimes at fairs, with theatre troupes, in their camps;
Sometimes lost on desolate tracks, chasing butterflies,
Or peering into the nest of little fledgelings;
Barefoot, through burning sand and blizzards,
Fleeing from village and school—into shrines;
Sometimes in happy abandon among pretty girls the same age,
Sometimes restless like a whirlwind, eyes bloodshot,
In dream, floating in the air, a fugitive cloud,
Hanging from tree branches like birds,
I see a boy—wandering, independent, carefree,
Like the flowing water of strong mountain springs;
This tireless meddler pursues me
To every spot, to every turn, it follows me,
As though it were my shadow,
As though I am a fugitive from law;
He asks me—'so, you're Akhtarul Iman?'

I acknowledge the bounties of the omnipotent God
Who created this earth
As though it were a bed of velvet and brocade.
I admit that this canopy of skies
Is his gift; He put the sun,
The moon and stars in space,
And ordained their orbits.
He caused rivers to flow from the heart of stones,
Created me from dust and made me the lord of creation,
Filled oceans with pearls, mines with rubies
And the air with the most pleasurable fragrance

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He is the omnipotent Master, the one, the Sagacious,
Separates darkness from light;
If I know myself, it's
His kindness and benevolence.
He has granted lordship to the mean, poverty to me
And made idiots my creditors;
He has given wealth to the vain, and made me a beggar;
But whenever I held out my hands to beg,
This boy asked: 'Akhtarul Iman—is it you?'

My livelihood is in others' hands,
Only my mind is still my own, that knows.
I've to bear the burden the rest of my days,
Till my elements merge, my pulse sinks
I've to go on singing—
Eulogy of dawn or elegy of night;
Before the victors—my alms-givers
I've to smile and say—
It's their song, not mine;
I've to display before all—
My creations, the products of sleepless nights
Like a counterfeit coin;
Often when I think about myself, I say:
'You're a blister, bound to break,'
Restless as the nightly breeze awaiting dawn
When I seek help from night to end my plight
This boy asks—'Are you really Akhtarul Iman?'

As the boy asks, I flare up and say :
That unhappy, thoughtful and restive self
You persistently address to, is long dead;
I wrapped him with my own hands
In the shroud of self-deception
And laid him to the grave of his desires;
I tell the boy that the spark
That thought to burn the rot of the world
In a huge bonfire, has long been dead;
The boy smiles and says quietly:
'That's a lie, a pretence, a fib
Look! I'm alive.'

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COMPROMISE

When I kiss her, the odour of cigarettes enter my nostrils
I always considered tobacco smoking a bad habit;
But I've become used to it,
It has become a part of my being.
She, too, has got used to my discoloured teeth.
When we meet we become strangers to words,
What remain in the room are—
Some breaths, stench of sweat and loneliness.
Probably we're dead
The fountain of consciousness has dried up,
Or perhaps this whole tale is a rotten one.

New messiahs come and are crucified.
An earthy man makes his way through the rows
of men standing in prayer and shouts from the pulpit—
"We are the heirs to the crucified,
This blood is our inheritance."
And all those ideals, those causes for reproof
Get absorbed in the stomach
Of that earthy man,
And then comes out in the form
Of commentaries and arguments.
These arguments are the illusory props
Of the helpless;
Probably they are everyone's props.

My quest is for an ideal man.
Everyone nurses a private dream, a vision,
Likes to fly on the wings of fancy;
Then a time comes when he cries
His heart out, breaks like twigs;
He meets his soul-mate, the best gift
On earth, then starts
Hating her, yet loves her.
I hate her
And she thinks I'm mean;
But when we meet—alone in darkness,
We become like kneaded clay.
Hate dissolves into desolation,
A desolation that has always been there
Since the creation of the earth.

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We keep breaking as though
We're tender twigs.
We do not talk about the dreams we once had
We do not talk about the moments of happiness
That have long been buried.
We just keep breaking within.

I'm drawn towards wine
She keeps on smoking cigarettes;
We are wrapped in a sheet
Of desolation.
We keep breaking as though
We're tender twigs.

IT SEEMS TO HAVE HAPPENED YESTERDAY

All of us were sitting
In a family assembly.

Bhaia was on the right
Close to him sat Shabana, the Badhi Aapa
Regaling us with tales of her in-laws,
Jokes, anecdotes.
She had a flair for story-telling
And we would burst out laughing.

Amma was sitting right in front
The casket opened before her, as was her wont.
Mouth filled with *paan,* she'd hark
The *Samdhan's* antics from her daughter,
And sometimes made a caustic remark.

Naeema and Shahnaz sat
On the outer circle
And indulged in childish tiff
And wrangle.

The *Manjhli Aapa,* as usual
Catered to everyone's needs
She often bounded in through the doors
Then went back to her chores.

Abba was quite far from us.
Sitting in his room, doing sums.

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All of a sudden a clamour was heard :
'A new land has been created';
The assembly broke up in a trice
As the eyes opened, the earth was red;
But the mind gave solace—
'It's not blood, don't shout'
(It) might be the *paan* juice
Amma spat out.

□

Translated by M. Asaduddin



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Ali Sardar Jafri

THE HUMBLE HEART

In the market place
for compassion, faithfulness
I offer for sale
my humble heart.
It cannot carry a price
in silver and gold
or in precious stones.
The royal crown, the mighty throne
are all trash; the heart is priceless.
Is there a man
who could endow sad evenings of lips
with a bright morning of smiles,
dip the pale dry leaf of thirst
in a spring-time cup of wine,
take away tears from mournful eyes
and return them
transformed into pearls,
bestow the wealth of labour
to helpless idle hands,
lead despondent hearts
to pathways of blossoming hopes,
enkindle a flame
with the charm of morrow,
remove earth's hunger
and fill it with sheaves of wheat,
bring men together
and create Man.

Is there a man
who carries the image of my dreams
in his eyes?
I shall offer at his feet

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my precious heart
my humble heart
a flower.

AN UNREAD BOOK

I am a leaf of a book
Somebody wrote it
Someone else happens to read it
Every tree, every branch is a pen
The oceans are inkwells
Full of molten silver ink of streams
Fingers of winds
From the flowing vast azure sky
Create words
Light of stars writes
Dance of the earth writes
Darts of passing moments
Lances of events in transit
Friends
Strangers
Write
The daggers in the hands of foes
Are covered with blood
The sword of intrigues writes
The tip of envious thorn moves like a pen
The foul vitriolic tongue writes
The disreputed, ignominous
The effete tongue also writes
But among all of them
My heart, my passion writes
I am a leaf
A feeling of being incomplete
But still a complete book, perhaps
If you could possibly read it
Pray tell me
What it says.

A POEM

Life is a drawn sword
We walk over its sharp edge

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And leave our foot-marks
In every drop of blood
The drops move in a cavalcade
And go far
Adorned
In colourful dreams of spring.

Translated by Balraj Komal



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Kaifi Azmi

THE MOMENT

Whenever I kiss her beautiful eyes,
a hundred lamps light up in the dark.
The heart is drawn to dry lips.
A thousand mirrors dance in the blood.
Blossoms, buds, the moon, the stars,
even my foes
stoop down
and touch my feet.
The mind is aflame,
the soul afire.
A human resplendence
prevails around.
Temples give out heavenly light.
Smiling gods
reign over skies.
The Ajanta figures frisk and dance.
Caves
for ages mute
burst into song.
The bounty of spring for ever abounds.
Beneficient clouds float in the sky.
The world for a moment
sheds its angry malevolent face.
The stones for a moment
cover themselves
with a radiant smile.

पुस्तकालय
पुस्तकालय
गुरुकुल काँगड़ी विश्वविद्यालय
101168

TOYS

Sand boats, scum boat-men,
soft-wood railroads, mother-of-pearl elephants,
light and heavy plastic contraptions,

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wax wheels
that move nor stop.
Ash fields, dust barns,
steam apparels, smoke houses,
magic canals, prayer bridges,
dream rattles,
thread-ball disciples, jute-rope gurus,
card-board adzes, fragile glass Farhads*,
plain-flour scholars, granular Imams*,
rolled-bun poets,
woolly darts, cotton swords,
clay kings
and their pliable rubber viziers.
Carrying our toys
in empty hands
for ages we walked
on the tight rope between
two distant posts.
We neither did tumble
nor steadily could
along the rope
abide.

Translated by Balraj Komal

Farhad : Celebrated Persian statuary who, to please his mistress Shirih, dug through an immense mountain.
Imam : Muslim religious priest.

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Majrooh Sultanpuri

A GHAZAL

When I was endowed with light
pain gradually got soothing
for my being
The agony of cherished love
turned into
an anguished concern
for others.

The ways of the world
by and by
changed
The song in the heart
was now
a plaintive cry
in distress.

I had set out all alone
towards my goal
Others joined me on the way
and together we moved
in ever swelling numbers
in a caravan.

I shall know of his sincerity
if he evenly fills
the cup of both
the high and the low
A crafty tavern keeper
he turned
whosoever had earlier
come this way.

Whatever road we the untiring, aspiring ones took

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The thorns
turned into blossoms
and blossoms
into flower gardens.
The tale of woe
though got short and brief
in good time
in her presence
But the word I never uttered
metamorphosed
into a tale, a legend.

There is hardly any everlasting theme, Majrooh!
in this world
But whatever I touched
was made abiding
for ever abiding.

A GHAZAL

Going was now easier, wind had favourably turned
When, hand in hand,
together we walked;
The path was lit
by a thousand lamps.

My love had blushed at my request,
won't raise her head
she coyily had bent
The dark tresses covering her face
had set aflutter
a thousand mystries
of nights.

The words, my love
never could say
quietly flowed
into my music and song
The lips
I could never kiss
delicately turned
into goblets of wine

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The mishaps of your graceful presence
have gone well
quite long
with them
You may give them now a favourable look
or turn your eyes away from them
The ones that had fallen for you
now stand upright
steady on their feet.
My exertions, my wanderings
eventually stood me in good stead
The journeys got
so extensively long
that my feet
were freed
of rankling thorns. □

Translated by Balraj Komal

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Nida Fazli

PARTING

When I took leave of her,
she did not say a word
but when I opened my bag
at the airport
I found
she had quietly placed
photographs of her two children
underneath my clothes.
She is my younger sister.
I wonder
why she had
blessed me
like a mother.

THE THIRD MAN

They were great friends,
their friendship sprang
from their hostility
towards a third.
They joined hands
and removed him
from their way
and in an instant turned
into one another's foes.

PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD

If different graves
did not have
separate epitaphs
the same grief
would lie reposed

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in all of them
a mother's son
a sister's brother
a lover's fiance.
You may say your prayers
at any of the graves
and quietly
depart.

Translated by Balraj Komal

THE DISTANT STAR

After long years
Of searching my home
I reached there.
But in that house
I could not find my home anywhere.
Now my brothers are the husbands of strange women,
In that house
Now my sisters come to meet me with strange men,
Divided in their own circles,
The love of my brothers and sisters
Is now recognised only with exchange of gifts.
So long as I stayed there,
Washing the brush, shaving stick etcetra
Putting them properly in the kit
After my morning shave
Was my job;
I myself had to count my clothes to be given to laundry.
My house was no more
The home
Of those who, despite their divided selves,
Were wholly mine.
They knew
Where to find my lost articles;
It was now very late.
A lost home, late in the evening,
Appears like a distant star in the sky,
That only attracts you
But never comes
To your succour.

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THE BRIDGE OF WORDS

Quiet is
The dome of the mosque,
And silent are the bells of the temple.
The ideals revealed in the scriptures,
Enveloped in ornate cases,
Have long been consumed by moths.
Colours :
Pink,
Blue,
Yellow,
No more, anywhere.
You, on the other side
I, on this,
Miles deep gorge between.
The bridge of words has broken.
You are alone,
So am I.

Translated by Naqi Husain Jafri.

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Kumar Pashi

A WOMAN HAD SEVEN ISLANDS

The virgin, the pure one
Ruled over
Seven Islands
Night would rest her head
On her tresses
And peacefully sleep
Sun would open her eyelid-doors
Quietly step out
And slowly spread its sunshine
Far and near
Over her seven green stretches of land.

Buds would blossom into flowers
At a word from her
Wherever she walked
Lighted paths
Waited for her
When I opened my eyes
In her streams
Angry clouds covered her lands
The crazy one of seven islands
Never could know the dark and evil orbs
That sent the clouds.

She had in her
The light of
A rising day
I had in me
A deep and dark
Gloomy night
She, the little innocent bird, was never aware
While I was adorned in her flesh
She always walked in her skin

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The woman of seven islands
Yes, it's true
Was my mother.

A VISIT TO OLD TOWNS

When I visit many of the old towns
I have known
I shall carry with me
A handful of dust
Some fruit
Some flowers, some stars
Some streets, some idols
Some colourful beliefs
Some sights
And some friends, apprehensively torn
By pangs of separation
Shall also go with me.

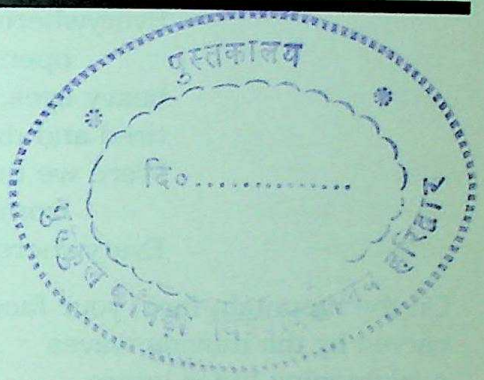
The wind will ask: Why have you come?
And why have you brought with you
All these things
Unknown birds flying in the sky
Descending towards
The earth
Will be clearly seen by all
The people of
These old towns
Shall get on to roof-tops
And cry for long and many a year.
Our triumphant shouts
Shall rend the air
And surely be heard by all
Far and near.

Translated by Balraj Komal

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Shamsur Rahman Faruqi



IN PURSUIT OF DEATH

There's nothing at all in the house
but a dark scent

Nothing glows now
but the firefly
of fear

When I searched the mountain foothills, there was nothing there
but the scent of blood scattered
on snow

She went away: there was nothing left in my eyes
but a deer's sooty green-glowing
leap

ELEGY FOR BROKEN AFFECTIONS

We're the ones
who wandered your roads
with a store of young grief
to look for old age.
We felt that the wealth of grief
offered shelter
We knew that grief had power—
take some care, you can live on it.

When we touched your dawn-light colour
fire burned in our fingers
When we caught a glimpse of your nights
the brightness of day dimmed
When we looked at the gardens closely
their colours changed of themselves—
Sheaves of wheat, green and gold
turned out to be

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the earth's secret sin—
they awoke, importunate, urgent

On the mountain-face, an image
when did the waves carve it?
On the spring breeze face, your image
so often formed, and broken!
while the mountain-face remains

Everywhere a crowd of watching eyes, half-
open staring
heavy eyes, eyes red with fever
tired and dreamy eyes
Were we those eyes? Where did they come
from?
Everywhere, we looked only for you.

On the mountain-face, your face
carved by the moving waves
a frightening bitter image
all night it laughed at us all

We—
not to speak of our store of grief,
whatever we had
we lost

We're the ones who wandered your roads with a store of young
grief to look for the moonlight silence
of old age

HALF-BAKED

The wind of heaven
breezed into my house
without fear I asked her,
When will you turn into
a whirling flame?
We have to burn my
heart-and-soul rubbish
to ashes.
I can't stop shivering
the walls tremble
It's so cold

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it freezes the blood
in my hair-roots
The rafters shrivel
like junkies' eyes
Look—that miserable cat
hiding in the corner
the brown dirty clouds
of her staring eyes
can't rain roses, poppies, sparks.
A black cat wandering
hiding in a dark house
Aren't you ever going to turn into
a whirling flame?

The wind of heaven answered,
In the thread of my breath
lurks a brutal redness
like blood held in a delicate vein.
If you grab me tight
and squeeze me
you'll see the sparks dripping.
Take a fistful of me
put me in your mouth
swallow me and see
I'm a golden arrow,
I pierce the throat and turn into
flame. You
don't know how to burn □

Translated by Frances W. Pritchett

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Balraj Komal

THE MOTHER

The burden
on my mother's bent back
grows heavier and heavier
as dawn heralds
a new-born day.

The children she bore—
my brothers, sisters
near and dear ones—
all my own
now cover the earth
far and away
and keep on
unloading on her bowed down back
countless measures of rotting debris
of their time-old sins.
The mother, they think
will carry her burden
to the end of the road

But the mother is now
so heavily weighed down
under the mounting load
on her back
it's likely that
the protective distance
that so far saved her
from her death
may eventually come
to a mournful naught.

But she, the Mother
never she falters

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never she stops
on her way.
Oblivious of things
quiet and serene
beyond all weariness
at her usual pace
on she struggles
on she trudges
and on and on ....

TERMITE

It crawled into our home so
surreptitiously and quietly
that the doors, windows, tables, chairs
books, clothes
children's playthings—
all were gone
in a couple of days.
The worn out walls and roof
came crumbling down
in consequent ruin
and lay in a heap.

Clad in twigs and leaves
of the creepy killer
the miraculously saved
inmates sit
under a cheerless, dusty sky
over a mound of rubble
once their home,
lost in the hope—
a cleansing shower
from a probable overcast sky
may one day, perhaps
wash them bright.

PLAGUE

In the circle of a strange light
A body-blossom
A rider

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A dream bound wayfarer
Triumphant in the midst
Of flesh and blood
Revelling in nearness
A handsome lusty man
And his inviting woman
Or there were those simple souls
Whose attire was neither lack luster
Nor could it acquire the colour of
A vibrant dirge
The seasons here were so perverse
And full of muck
That the circle of light
When got ablaze
In a moment turned
The earth and the sky
Into a fiery raging hell.

I was one of the offspring of
Chance-born, thriving race of crooks
That couldn't devise
A cure of the blight
But wove, in stead
With a flourish of lips
A fabric of words.
Plagues were galore
Once on prowl
They took their toll
Friends or foes
The latest of them
Swallowed them all
Assuming that I had done my bit
In a flash of a glance
I gave it an awesome popular name
Plagues of sorts
Were all galore
Dauntless they raged
All around.

Translated by the Poet

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Shahryar

THE DOORWAY TO DREAMS IS CLOSED

1. The night
Has Unfolded
A new crisis for me
It emptied my eyes of sleep,
And filled
The sockets with tears
And whispered into my ears:
'you have been exonorated
of all crimes,
And henceforth set free
For all time.
Go, where ever you wish
Awake or asleep,
The doorway to dreams is closed.'

DREAMS

2. Far from the eyelids
And close to tears,
Sleep sits, still annoyed.
Dreams have again come
To reunite
Hearts, broken by their interpretations.

NEW DAY—NEW CURSE

3. Dewdrops on green branches
Are still asleep,
While the Sun comes,
Riding its Chariot.

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THE ROMANCE OF TODAY

4. Distances have not yet winked,
The dream-house is still safe
From the flames of failures and disappointments.
Let the tales of the coming dawn remain untold.

THE CHIMERA OF CHIMERA

5. In the desert of the day, out of helplessness,
Looking for refuge
We went that side,
And now
In the fathomless sea of the night
We rove our dream boats.

THE EVE OF THE JOURNEY

6. Who has cut the story line—
Hearths extinguished, multitude of dry yellow leaves ... forlorn;
Under the blue canopy,
Over the green grass,
The surge of sleep near and far,
A lamp in the cold hand of the wind,
Smoke coming from near the flame of the lamp.
Smoke, that is the night-past
Smoke, that is the night-to-come
Smoke, that went down the hearts from the eyes
Smoke, that is the wound and source of light—
Who has cut the story line?
Eyes, which slept, was night
Eyes, that awake, was night
Hearths extinguished, multitude of dry leaves ... forlorn,
The surge of sleep, near and far.

SATIRE ON MOURNING

7. With tribute from the seas,
Passing through dreadful deserts,
Hossain Ibne Ali, with his troops,
Is on its way, it has arrived.
The trees vibrate in ecstacy,

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The angels are prostrate,
Lamps lit all over.
What makes you sad, tell me,
What has befallen
Why should the band of mourning
Remain fastened to your arm?

Translated by Naqi Husain Jafri



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Mohammad Alvi

OFFER

Drink the cold fridge water
eat the *ghee*-soaked bread
sleep on the white bed
entertain yourself with the TV,
God, come to my house one day
come and hide
in my house one day.

MY NAME

My name
lies in the deep layers of the sea
where the bright-coloured fishes
swim all around,
the water plants
have sent their roots in it.
I only wish
the branches of the trees
to appear on the water surface one day
and the blossoms of my name
to show them.

THE FOURTH FIRMAMENT

And I said to God:
look, your creation has reached
the fourth firmament.
Then I heard a voice coming from the skies:
"Let there be",
and just in a wink
seven more firmaments
spread over the fourth firmament

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and one more jungle
grew inside me.

EPITAPH

As soon as I reached the grave
I stretched my limbs to rest
and thought
and no one will disturb me now,
these two yards of land
are mine, mine alone,
and so I kept mixing with the soil
and even lost the count of time.
I thought at last I was at rest
but soon enough
my ease was snatched from me.
It so happened
that I had not yet become soil
some other person
entered my grave
and now some one else's epitaph
is engraved on my grave.

Translated by Anisur Rahman

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Ameeq Hanfi

IT WAS DARK

It was dark and there was a black apparition
In the Red Fort
The fort had been brightly illuminated
In concentric circles
But still it was dark, pitch dark
Darkness had, in fact, swallowed the Red Fort
Nearby objects formed a back drop
And the prevailing dark in turn their back drop
Light continually raced on roads
The intersecting rounds of light
Had lit up
Stray dust particles floating in the dark
Darkness incessantly drained
Tattered,
Racing, flying, dispersing light.
A dark alligator swam about
Holding fish of light
In its jaws
And would forcefully blow its foul breath
Over the Red Fort
Which was now not visible in the dark
The entire edifice, its towers, domes
All had turned into a black spectre
The Red Fort had gone phantasmal
But, beyond doubt, it was there
It was dark
And in the ocean-cave of darkness
The Red Fort
It was there, verily there.

THE FUSE

It is a common experience,
when electric current bounces

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at high voltage through wires,
there is a sudden shock
and the fuse is blown off.
If it were not so,
the whole house
may, possibly, go up in flames.
But the fuse is refixed;
the current resumes its flow;
the light returns to the house.

Currents of feelings
though, normally, race through the mind
day and night,
It happens, sometimes,
that when a racing current
of a feeling
rushes in high tension
from the mind to the heart,
there is a powerful blast.
The heart loses a beat.
Some hope is lost in the fire
Another one, however, takes its place.
Pit-a-pat
Then a regular beat
The heart again turns into heart. □

Translated by Balraj Komal

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Zubair Rizvi

ONE

Yearning to meet each other
we kept counting the months and years,
the months and years for long.

When we really met one day
all the moments passed by
whispering of the past months and years.

The sun,
setting in the lap of the valleys
left us alone,
all alone in the night's *mehfil*,
and we,
even without a feel, a touch,
a promise to meet again
got lost in the dark alleys.

TWO

You said
you loved so much—
waters, jungles, mountains.

And here
all these are within your
eye's reach

But now
even among all these
why are you so impatient to listen
to the waves of my sound.

THREE

It was a chance meeting
while traversing the new lands.

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We brushed the dust of feet
drank from the cool fountain
listened to the journeys tale
and strange dreams glistened in our eyes.

At once
we spread the map of new lands
and changed our directions.

FOUR

The journey of the unseen lands
and the dreams of those terrains
float in your eyes.

What good is this
to stop here a while
under the shade of trees
in the stillness of night.

Let's listen
to our own footfalls
for long distances
on these ways
with a sense of togetherness.

FIVE

We met that evening
with such crush, such passion
praising the scene every bit of a moment.

But tell me honestly
was it a reaction
against the long stretches
of tiresome loneliness
or just a way to escape.

SIX

We kept floating in waters of the lake
for long hours—
your body dangled
in new angles

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in the lap of waves.

I remembered
many a tale of the lovely mermaids.

I felt
I was wet,
and the whirlpool had sent me down
in a crystal castle
in the pit of the earth.

And I felt
you were preparing
for a lovely dance
among the lovely mermaids.

SEVEN

We were making angles
for a long kiss
when your eyes
got entangled with the birds in flight,
you wound up your journey
and emptied the hands of time
that once were full. □

Translated by Anisur Rahman

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Adil Mansuri

ON TIME'S BACK

Perched on time's back
Caught in the strings of brittle moments
Crawling on steps of words
I turned into an inventor
Of increasingly newfangled ways to end life.
I know not
Whom do I gather for
Bones of togetherness
Scattered in the jungles of barbrous nights
When letters forming my name were all alone
Tell me, friends, how were you favoured
With the bounty of red lips
My eyes
On a platter
In the refrigerator
Lay denuded
Away from the hands of any dream.

Do not look at the decay of the shattered sky
Through the eyes of a pigeon
I need your help
For a hasty retreat
From the crumbling ruins
Of my body.

ON MY FATHER'S DEATH

He did not have a wink of sleep for forty nights
Carrying his dreams on camels
He wandered through wastes of nights
Burnt himself on pyres of moonlight
His denture resting in a cup

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Often grinned
The jasmine bud again raised its head
From behind his dark glasses
Gloom merrily sprang from the eyes
The rapidly moving shadows
Of green waters
Gradually crept into the flesh
The hand of the spirit turned into a sieve
A pointed needle
Put out
Lamps of carnal longing
In the mortal frame
Underneath the shade of ten stars
Stuck on the surface of the ceiling
Images got blurred
Images withered away

MARINE DRIVE

Tired of the city crowds
The high-rise buildings
Freed themselves from hostile decibels
And have stood long
In rows
On the beach
To plunge for death
Into the waiting sea.

Translated by Balraj Komal

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Khaleelur Rahman Azmi

GHAZAL

Life, your songs I played
On the flute of death,
Wishing you always more and more honour.
O source of contentment,
I was fated to be deprived,
And remain athirst
Though your stream flowed nearby.
From this end to the other,
Only chains of sorrow;
The goal always receding
Though the path appears full of wayfarers.
Who it was? What the name?
What did I have to do with him?
Now there remains—
Only a vague sketch in my mind's screen.
O sky! the Sun is pitiless,
But your blue canopy,
Is my shelter;
May is last eternally long.

I AM NO GAUTAM

I am no Gautam
But when I too left home,
I had thought,
I am going to discover myself.
I too will sit,
Under the shade of a tree
And would attain *gyan* one day.
But the fire of bodily desire,
Which forced me out of my home,
Continued to consume me,

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The wind outside my home blew strong
And it caught on
The trees one by one, reducing them to ashes.
I now wander in such a desert
Where only I exist,
Where there is only one shadow,
The shadow of a shadow,
And as far as I can see
Only a void.

PERSONAL

Whatever befalls me,
I will not be able to tell anyone.
The pains I have suffered,
The burden of sins I carry in my heart,
I don't have the courage to speak of them.

In the books others have written,
I look for my own story
Wherever I find the story of my life,
I erase all such lines,
Remove them with ink.
I fear if people read these lines,
Stopping me on the way,
I don't know, what all they might ask.

Translated by Naqi Husain Jafri

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Baqar Mehdi

THE EXILE

The train came to an abrupt halt
I got off the carriage
With the baggage of memories
And stood on the platform.

A misty desolation reigned,
A shadow came to me—
I handed over the ticket and asked :
'Is this my land, babu?'
He glimpsed my face in the dim lamp-light—
'What do I know
Whoever comes, makes this query
I know only this—
The ramshackle structure of walls
That are called houses,
How helpless are the minds, the lonely souls there!
To the long nights of silence and the black nights
Of desire
They have surrendered everything—'

What could I say to this?
I came out of the station
And trudged on the track to reach the village;
The branches of the old banian tree looked at me
In surprise,
My childhood was spent in its shade.

At last I reached the door of my *haveli*
Disquiet greeted me warmly,
Shadows inside the house
Whispered something to my ears,
I cried out in terror.
Memories of yore are inside my bag

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Open it and see —!'
I overturned the bag
Nothing was there;
I said slowly—
'I don't know who robbed me of everything—!'
The shadows began to laugh loudly—

Then the disquiet said only this—
'Stranger!, you wander about with empty bags
Who are you?
Where are you bound?'—

WORDS

From the first cry to the present
the rhythm of breath
beyond the sound of footsteps
warmth of touch,

The first line of the first song
The quaver of eyelashes, and
the heartbeat comes to form
to make elusive lines of blue, yellow and black ...

Penetrating the walls of words
freeing itself from the shades of meaning
comes a whisper
as though the whole universe was born one day
just like that.
The fountain of words exploded
the voice of the heart got expression
silence spoke out in the mind
hands moved and shadows came
steps laid foundation for a way;
in the darkness of meaningless shadows
words lit the lamps
perhaps the world came to being with the help of words.

Today the world is a market, out of joint
noise, only noise
So much so that it seems the doomsday has passed us;
How can one recognise one's own voice here?

Translated by M. Asaduddin

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Qazi Saleem

THE TOURIST

We are paupers
Just paupers
You may go back now.

There is hardly a spark
In the cold ashes of our glorious past
Or a mindful thread
Over our blemished flesh
But the beat on the drum is ceaseless
The fateful cry may any moment
Bring wild dancing crowds
On streets
And heads may roll in dust.

Vultures of yore
Are already fluttering their wings
On snow clad mountain tops.

Monuments, ancient ruins
You have already plundered them all
No treasure is left any where now
Whatever we had is neatly arranged
On your museum shelves
We are paupers, have nothing now
Snake charmers, maharajas, magicians
Have all turned into butler-logos
Of native airlines.

We are paupers
You may go back now.

LIBERATION

Thundering, crumbling, falling clouds

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Perpetual raining of stones from the sky
Wailing homes and hearths
Broken roofs
Dripping water
Spreading over window panes
Sliding, breaking tiny streaks
Shaping themselves in strange, unknown forms
Like lines on palms of
Tired hands.

The void in the heart is seldom empty
It fills itself with whatever
It lays its hands on
But a desire is after all a desire
Whether it's even for death
Once again
There is rush of blood in the aching veins
Once again cobwebs spread over window panes
Wailing, crying is nothing
But the last lifeless
Fluttering of wings.

I know when time flows
It never tells a wave from a wave
Whether it is calm and quiet
Or dashes its head
Against the shores
Or moaning, crawling
Goes its way.
Or writhes in pain and ends up in the coastal sands
Whatever it does
It matters not.
The creeping, crumbling tiny lines
Have now started
Emerging out of cracks in the floor
We know not how far shall they go
Some heartening word, some mellifluous ring, some dreamful wish
How will they shield us from raining stones?

Thousands of worlds are made, unmade
Every moment
Tall trees fall
Rocks are crushed into tiny particles

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And rankle in the veins
Windows have lost their eyes
Under repeated, heavy onslaught of rains
A dumb and deaf ambience prevails
Perhaps both life and death
Are not for me
Today
My eyes, my ears, my tongue
Feeling of touch
All are gone
I am a witness to my own hell
The world around me mocks at me
I look at myself writhing in pain
Dashing my head against the walls
So blissfully content
As if I were brought,
Into fortuitous being
From unknown worlds
By raining clouds.

Translated by Balraj Komal

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Munibur Rahman

THE MIRROR

At the break of day the mirror
said come on, come right ahead
what is this hesitation?
For such a long time I have known you.
Why do you need an introduction?
One day an innocent baby
played and pauted before me
but perhaps you don't remember now.

In the evening on a cold street
a shadow crawls towards me
and says come, let us go,
let us have some tea in the restaurant
and I wonder if everyone knows me here.
Sometimes I am a reflection, sometimes
a shadow wandering in search of the kernel
trying to know who I am.
I have spent my whole life
and still I am a stranger to myself
everyone saw me, but only I
never could see my own self.

Translated by Gopichand Narang

A SANTHAL DANCE

Stone whirlpools
make darkness cry.
Heartbeats of storms
reverberate
among *Deodar* trees.
Jungles resound

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with roar of lions.
Peacock-feather fans, lances, bows.
Tongues of violent flames
loll out of
orgiastic mouths.
Drops of venom, it seems
for ever shall drip
like pain from ebon breasts of women.
Their thighs shall cry
for sharp penetrative thrust.
Barbrous feet
shall walk on gravel
turn into blood
and dance to the beat.

TELEPHONE

Failing evening light
Worn out faces
on this side of windows
Eyes staring
At T.V. screen
A forlorn shell
Each one of them.
Grown up children
Have gone their way
Hearts are asunder
Phone has come
To be the only link.

They, too, someday
Shall sit in failing light
On this side of windows
Their grown up children
Shall go their way
Their faltering eyes
Shall stare and stare
At T.V. screen
The phone shall ring
In lonesome hearts
And ring ... and ring .... and ring ....

Translated by Balraj Komal

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Makhdoom Mohiuddin

DARKNESS

The night has nothing but a begging bowl;
The twinkling Stars, the shining Moon,
In borrowed robes, reflected glory,
Their wedding gown, their shroud.

The night that unfolds,
The groan of dying bodies,
The ambuscade of the dogs of devil,
The scars of civilization—
Moats,
Barbed fence,
Entangled bodies in the fence,
Vultures perched on those bodies,
Crackling of skulls,
Bodies with chopped limbs,
Through one end of skeletons to the other,
The chilling wind,
Wailing, Crying, complaining,
Sounds of sobbing infants and mothers
In the stillness of night.
The silent mourning
Of the Moon, the Stars.
A cluster of forlorn Stars on the forehead of night
—Only till the break of the dawn.

The night has nothing but darkness,
The night has nothing but darkness.

THE THICKET OF THE STARS AND THE MOON

The bodies of martyrs burnt like wax
The flame of the dawn of Freedom flickered night long
The thicket of the Stars and the Moon dazzled bright.

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Athirst,
But excited even in that state
Blank sockets of the still curious eyes
Of anxious men and women,
Ecstatic, overwhelmed with joy and eager
Danced through the night,
Only to see a wall of grief
With the coming of dawn.
Thorny patches of sorrow,
Blood gushed forth of the veins of night
And turned into a pool.

Leaders, crafty and artful
With the blow of poisonous vipers
And the black smoke of hatred in their chests,
From their ambuscade,
Lifting the tip of their tongues
Consumed the life blood of the coming dawn.
The lees of night and darkness
Goes with the twilight of dawn.
Comrades,
With hand in hand
Towards the same goal,
The destination of love
Towards the abode of the beloved,
With cross held on our shoulders.

METEORS

Meteors
The stars deprived of the care of the sky
Told me:
My cry of pain had drowned in the galaxy
In the on-going deluge of moons and stars
The celestial beings
Had spotted a spark
A heart, a watchful eye
Among creatures of the earth
But what they had espied
Was my heartache-flame
Not a star
A creature of this earth

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Not a beautiful heavenly object
It settled deep down
In the hearts
Like an ardent shaft
Love was blood
When flowed it spread across the sky

The celestial beings
Strangers to the trevails of the mortals of the earth
Though drained their woes
But could not cope
With tearful eyes
The earth's poison had done its job
The journey was over
The meteors now
Shot from the sky
And torn by pain
Lay in heaps
On the earth

This fire, this flame could leap and higher rise
Touch on the way, the haloed height
And soar afar in onward flight.

CONSUMMATION

The rainbow broke up and turned into nuptial bed
The *jhumar* on the brow
Gloriously glittered
Silence sounded suddenly shaken
Midnight opened its eyes
The blue flame of
Warmth of craving
For the parted one
Turned into a flute
Then into a lilt.

The *shahnai* that once had cried in pain
Now hangs her head
With swollen eyes
Quietly sits
The henna on her soft, warm hands
Sings a new and spring-time song

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A halting hand would often knock on nights
At heart's doors
He does it again, all over again
The doors ajar, eyes meet eyes
The throbbing hearts in unison beat
The *jhumar*, the faces
Now hide in the veil
The old reptile
In ruins of Daulat Khan's porch
Ruefully wails
The tongueless silence
Has found a tongue
The veil, the faces, the *jhumar*, the anklet
Are all for ever
For ever is the mate
For ever is love
The night of love is tearful now
Two blossoms of flesh in blazing heat
Dew drops they suck and drift into sleep. □

Translated by Balraj Komal

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THE PROFESSION

Ismat Chughtai

I was aware that she was a courtesan. That dyed red hair, those tight outfits and the crowd of men all the time. Music, dance, shrill and heavy laughter. These made me reel in my room without any reason. We women could defeat many a heavyweight, but an encounter with a courtesan and there goes all our femininity. This is the main reason that a mother while singing a lullaby to her child always emphasises that a courtesan is a serpent, dragon and heaven knows what else!

And this childhood abhorrence of the courtesan, seems to have entered my blood stream. Let a thousand women cross my path I wouldn't care, but the smell of a courtesan would make me alert like a targetted deer. I remembered that I happened to smell them first in my childhood. At Bahraich at the sacred tomb of Sayyad Mian, every thursday there used to be a gathering of the courtesans from all over the place. On those auspicious days pious and noble souls would also throng the tomb in larger than usual number. I don't know why one day a rather veteran courtesan picked me up in her arms. Oh her silken slippery dress and that peculiar aroma from her breast! I immediately climbed down from her arm.

That day everyone teased me at home that a prostitute had touched this poor me. I felt such deep resentment that I kept on crying for a long time. Then one day an aunt of mine visited us. She kissed me and there it was the same slippery dress and aromatic breast! I don't know why but I escaped from her! My guess was correct. My colourful auntie did not stay for more than a month. My Abba Jan, a father of ten, fell for her head over heels. My poor Mum, she just shrivelled. It was like a dull betel nut shop finding it difficult to survive in front of a gorgeous restaurant! Poor Mum had to find recourse in black magic. And then only did auntie complain of pain in her liver and suddenly leave. My

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point is that we women have a sixth sense to detect a courtesan. As it has been said that their armouries force us to erect defensive walls! She was coming down and I was going up when I smelled her. O God where had I come? What would the world say? What impression would my department have about me? Especially when it was a conglomoration of frustrated people. These departmental bureaucrats have little trouble outdoing the proverbial village gossips.

It was the day of Eed. What is Eed or what is Muharram for a person in my kind of poverty! Still in bed, unchanged I just kept on reading the newspaper. Pots and pans and crockeries were making their noise in the neighbour's apartment since 4 in the morning. These poor souls are very concerned about religious offering and prayers. As I was having my breakfast someone knocked at my door, and burst into the room even before I could compose myself.

No one can be certain of consequences that a courtesan should force herself in like that it was such an alarming experience that I got quite confused.

"Oh no! I hope you haven't finished your breakfast!—Delicious *sewaian* have been cooked," she hissed from her tight outfit. Stupid thing! She didn't even know that the days for such tight outfits had long gone for her. She looked like dough tied up in shoe laces.

"I don't eat sweets in the morning," I said like a proud housewife.

"Really! not even on Eed? Please taste it just for my sake!" She sat down on my bed without any formality.

Oh my God! I hope she had not taken me as a courtesan and come to wash my sins with those sacred offerings. How could I explain that I was pure, chaste and noble. She must have repeated such requests to thousands of her lovers! I was furious. But when she kept on insisting without any shame—I took two spoonfuls.

"My cook said that you are a Muslim. Ever since then I have been looking forward to meeting you, but you are nowhere to be found during the day." Then someone called her and she disappeared as suddenly as she had come.

I took two more spoonfuls! Oh God, I really felt like putting my fingers in my mouth and forcing myself to vomit. What had happened to me, that I should be eating from a prostitute's earnings? The detestable money, earned through selling her body. The money of a degraded and fallen woman!!

Then all sorts of shameful and subservient thoughts started to come to my mind. The money of this prostitute is also the money of my ancestors. I had an uncle who spent thirty thousand rupees in only three weeks on such prostitutes. I don't care if one of them

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might be my aunt—or related to this red haired woman. I started to eat the *sewaian* with more relish as if I was collecting all that thrown-away wealth. I felt contented. At least I was making a rich person somewhat poor. I took another spoonful and my mouth was filled with dried fruits and rose water, a pistachio came between my teeth. Greasy little bubbles started to dance in my mouth as if I had chewed a big fat money-lender—but then the very thought of his abundant fat made me sick. I felt the satisfaction of an anarchist burning British clothes. Our eyes derive immense satisfaction from creating figures of our fancy to fit empty dresses.

I took out Matriculation examination papers from the drawer of my bedside table and started to examine them. Here goes the Eed! I still had to examine three hundred more scripts. But when my thoughts wandered I found it difficult to harness them! I failed a few unfortunate ones. Then threw aside the copies and started to stretch myself. The weather in Bombay is peculiar. One feels as if one is wrapped in a big wet towel. Tired and sleepy, my body getting heavier as if someone had put glue on it and let it dry, I felt myself getting strangely intoxicated. And then the sudden blast of laughter from the neighbour.

How unfortunate! I started to pity the poor neighbour. It is possible that the poor thing was forced to sell her treasured chastity. Perhaps a tyrant might have robbed her of her virginity, leaving her no option but to become a bazaar commodity. I felt a sudden affection for her. When as children we fought over for food Amma would throw the food basket at us in disgust and say "Here you wretched, eternally starved lot! Now go and eat and die!!"

But as always evil thoughts crept into my mind along with noble ones. And as always, as soon as noble thoughts dozed off, evil raised its fang. Almost against my better judgement I felt certain that she became a prostitute by choice. Out of sheer laziness she escaped from the real world and adopted this profession. This neighbour was certainly not made for noble works like sewing or grinding wheat! Normal life has quite a few problems—husband, wife, children, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, you and me—the full catastrophe. Who in his or her right sense would want to get involved. She could hardly maintain her youth if she had a few mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law! How convenient!

One day as soon as I entered my apartment, screaming and shouting greeted me from the neighbour's room. A tiring and exhausting day, but one could not hope for peace here. After school one needs total relaxation for a few hours to recover one's strength!

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It seemed that the students squeeze the brain of teachers as if they chew it before spitting it out like sugar cane. It is not quite easy to bring freshness into the sucked out sugar cane and face the same sharp gnawing teeth next morning! Same routine for 260 days in a year, the same fate of the sucked sugar cane.

The door opened and she entered, her heels click-clacking noisily on the floor.

"I am tired of this Nigar—only Allah knows why so much fuss over this wretched school work, as if hell has broken loose!" How times have changed! Even the daughters of a prostitute show so much sensitiveness to education and homework. She even has the audacity to be critical in these matters!

"Than why do send her to school—withdraw her."

"Oh no! withdraw her? What advice—who ever would care for an uneducated girl. Now everyone wants a girl fluent in English like a Mem Sahib."

A new revelation—one has to be educated even in this profession—probably has to quote Shakespeare and Wordsworth! "What really has happened?"

"I only said darling Nigar please wear that 'Khara Payjama'*—but no—always no—only those European dresses—"

"She might listen to you if you persuade her—actually some people are coming from Delhi." She confided to me and I felt like scratching her red beetroot-like face—So? So I should persuade her? So in my B.T. I was taught to give professional advice to a prostitute's daughter. Just imagine me.teaching such girls to wear 'Payjama' for the people of Delhi, Sari for Calcuttans and Shalwar for Lahoris. How wonderful! Moreover the name—Nigar-Malti—I never liked such motivation. What is this? Is this a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity or an example of Hindu Muslim friction? Renowned leaders lost the battle to solve this problem and here was this lady whose so-called open mindedness had muddled all this Hindu-Muslim issue. But it is my habit that I consider everyone helpless. Perhaps this red haired Sethani was forced in this situation of helplessness—and could not remember in muddle headedness to place whose gift was this Nigar, and instead of depriving of someone's right she cared for both of them. Anyway!"

"Why don't you come to our place sometime—" she said with stubborness—and before I gave her a rude reply she said—"Nigar has learned new techniques of dance."

* A loose pant, usually worn in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar provinces by Muslims ladies.

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I really love a prostitute when she is dancing. She resembles exactly a hardworking labourer who for the sake of his living is tied like a bull, to the yoke of capitalism, or a housewife grinding the mill. Dancing is no joke, each piece of flesh in the body is well shaken, as if one has ground, ten seers of wheat. I do not detest the darker side of a prostitute's life because she is a bit different, no not at all—but—no it is unnecessarily difficult to explain no not even this—but just the same.

I plucked some courage and went to Sethani's apartment next day, just to see how their homes looked from inside. Oh my! Just imagine the house of a small Raja or a minister—large portraits—statues of naked women—these courtesans, I wonder why they keep the portraits of naked women in their houses—what is the use of this—perhaps the Sethani wants to hide her horrible wrinkles in the shadow of these perfectly formed statues—must be their special technique! Nigar was really bashful to see me as if she had just been hatched from the egg, and came to me after a great deal of coquettery. When the Sethani showed her displeasure she put on a record on the gramophone and began to dance.

These prostitutes! Oh my God! I was informed that their bodies decay and rot, but the Sethani was solid like a steel monument, and her offspring God forbid—what a supple and active body, as if a serpent was stretching herself. When putting one wrist on the other she makes a knot and hits the earth with her tiny toes so that the whole world seems to swing with her. My heart suddenly started to beat faster. Oh this serpent, who knows how many would be bitten by her; who knows how many victims she would put in her hunting bag. A woman is usually jealous of other women for no reason, but God save us all from a prostitute! A woman gets her share, that is a man from the market and then moves on, but no escape from a prostitute. Ordinary people take their grocery according to their needs from the shop and then go away, but special people hoard sacks after sacks of grain in the heart of their basement—result? If you have studied economics than you would know the result—dearth of food! This struggle which is going on with these prostitutes is like the struggle of workers with the capitalists. One works hard and other reaps the benefit. It is said that finally a burning day would come when the workers would crush the capitalist and would take away all their wealth. Perhaps women would one day attack and take away the "capital" of these prostitutes. Perhaps!!

Came evening and the customers started to come—I was sitting in a corner shame-faced and was looking for an excuse to take flight

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so that they did not take me as one of them. And finally it happened. She fixed me up with a dim editor. I could not even protest and she sold me off!

Soon the hall was full—colourful women and debauched men—they started to laugh loudly. In one corner a few started to drink and gamble. In another corner Nigar, surrounded by men, was laughing and showing off! She was the main centre of attraction. One middle-aged man was trying to pull her into his lap, and she was hitting him coquettishly and laughing.

But the Sethani really was worth looking at. Wearing a deep colour, gaudy dress which looked drab at daylight, but was sparkling now. Equipped with her make up she was looking like a new bride of four days and, surrounded by young men, she was demurely coquettish. She was looking so young and so beautiful. I was sitting there stunned and wondering about the secret of youth—coquettishness or tender years?

And there that confounded editor was chewing me. Progressive and clever talk, and with such charm that I could only stammer in confusion. His full attention was on those nude paintings which were hung near me—but I started to imagine that perhaps they were stuck on my body. Continuously touching those pictures with his fingers he was trying to explain their finer points. My reply was sheer embarrassment and looking for something important in my purse. Somehow he would come back to the serious problem of woman's breast, and creating romance in his watery eyes he was making suggestive moulds by his bony hands and explaining all these to me. Though I am quite obstinate, but even I was forced to fix my eyes to the patterns of the rug a few times. His every movement seemed that he was kneading my body like flour with his feet then, after making a horrible image, destroying it. He was really enjoying squeezing me like that and was smiling continuously. With bitterness I felt like making fun of a particular part of his body in such a way that even his dirty smiling eyes for once blink with shame. But my civility kept me in check!!

At the first opportunity I ran towards my room. I saw an officer near the gallery munching Nigar with gusto and she was crooning and scratching him.

In bed I could neither sleep, nor do anything. The inspectress was visiting the school next day. To attract her attention I had to woo her with many tricks: the lesson must be effective, my conversation impressive, dress dignified and my manners mild but firm—an attentive class, correct use of the black board—emphasis on the importance of analytical method of teaching—these were special tricks of

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my respectable profession! While lying down I started to do physical exercise—and then suddenly the thought flashed in my mind, that if someone saw me in this situation—the very thought of someone's presence made me so lonely. How lonely I was, except the company of the laughter, which was tumbling like huge rocks from the Sethani's apartment and hitting my brain. The jingling of bells and the sounds of clapping started to creep into my body and started to vibrate in my nerves—and then evil thoughts started to toss and turn in my mind.

If anyone had an inkling of those thoughts—heaven knows what would happen. I often shudder with fear with such thoughts. For example, I felt that this Sethani was trying to please her customers with her attires and make up only for the sake of a living—I do the same: respectfully dressed, mentally prepared I go to the court of my customers. The only difference is that all my wisdom and intellect are dried and sucked sugar cane—and the Sethani—a pitcher full of juice—I sell my brain, and the Sethani her body! And the value of my brain is equal to a secondhand tyre, that is Rs 70*, and the Sethani earns the same amount in her one sweet yawning! Even my father who was a prominent officer in His Majesty's India Services could not earn as much in his whole life time! We both are sitting in the bazaar to sell our commodities. Different goods, but the goal is the same! The position of my sucked up brain in front of her pneumatic body is like a small *paan* and *bidi* shop in front of a cricket club. I am certainly beaten in this business. And then I started to burn in the fire of my own imagination. People do sympathize with the courtesans and want to improve their lot—certainly not that they should completely disappear—no, but those who were in bad condition, they should live a better life!—their dirty clothes turn into glamorous ones—the homes which are located near dirty sewers, should move to "Marine Drive"**. The customers should come but not in such large numbers that they feel sick and tired. But here for us even if our salary and grades go down every year no one would give a hoot—students—or in other words Hell's caretakers—their number might double, headmistress suck you dry, office clerks chew you up, committee members swallow you up and belch—no one would care! Lady teachers are building up the minds of the children and the courtesan are consoling the hearts of the orphans! Both are doing their jobs—then—then why it is so?

Spending the night in such unsavoury thoughts there was little

* A reasonable salary for a teacher in early 1940s

** Once an expensive and exclusive area of Bombay

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chance to be flirtatious and charming in front of the inspectress. The result was that all hopes to become permanent this year was dashed to the ground! The desire to lead a life of contentment ended! And this punishment for one who decided to sacrifice her life for the sake of the nation ... that ... but the nation was sick of these half-dead cows—these sick goats—their very sight evokes repulsion for the nation!

Next day the Sethani came again—and then started to give me advice in such a way as if I was one of their real neighbours, and spending my life without much thought and care.

"My God! Study, study, study all the time—the poor wretched brain must have been numbed!!"

I protested meekly.

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"See how pale you look—"She started to sympathize with me and in me the ghost of rebellion started to dance—why she was bothering me unnecessarily. O God, where have I come? The building seems to be the dwelling of respectable people—The name plates have respectable names too—Miss Cotino, Miss Walker—Mrs. Abdullah—Miss Rasheed—Mrs .....

"That Mr. Hameed wanted to meet you again—" This was the same editor—! So she had decided to take me under her wings in her profession. That is from her customers she would select the dead and dried one and pass them on to me.

"No I must take you to the cinema today—" she said coquettishly.

"But I have ... " It should be known that my profession is not only respectable but also demanding.

"Oh leave it for once, you are always busy. Mr. Hameed has specially brought this cinema pass for you, and you are trying to avoid it—this is really the age to enjoy life—"

O my God—so this is the end of my respectable profession and the beginning of the profession of "fun and game"!!?—God forbid if my poor mother comes to know about it how she would feel about her virtuous daughter being waylaid, and nearly sold: today cinema passes were coming, tomorrow Banarsi Sari, day after tomorrow diamond tops, and day after he himself with all his artistic thoughts—and his rough and dried hands making the moulds ... O God!

I rudely refused and she left mumbling quite disappointed.

"What was wrong in it. That is why it is said that girls should not go for higher studies."

"Oh yes! and why not? What they will do after education—God save your lovely profession, what is the use of raking your brain? I

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could not understand why in spite of my rudeness the neighbour kept coming to see me!

I started to rearrange my test copies. Oh God—these failed morones deliberately give so much heartache. I wished that if there was any number worse than zero I should give it to them. Let them go to hell—felt like failing even those who did not fail—so that all of them, like the Sethani, fall on the cave of disaster.

Than another thought came to my mind—no—that wouldn't be a suitable punishment—it was better that I would make them hard-working and courageous lady teachers—so that ... so that—they would ...

I could not think any further.

The Sethani and Nigar went out giggling and laughing with Hameed Sahib and few other committed admirers to the cinema. I was still awake when they came back. Whenever I started to doze all the evil dragons charged me with their gnawing teeth. How can one work like this? It would be disastrous if I lived for another day or two in this prostitute's neighbourhood. My thoughts were getting mixed up every day. I was too scared even to talk to my conscience—God knows what comment it might make.

Holding my head in my hand I kept sitting on my bed for a long time—Tired and exhausted the Sethani was sleeping—the apartment was quite. Some naughty thoughts raised their heads—gave them a little lattitude and there was a flood of them—My mind was bubbling with laughter, but there was no smile on my face—Respectability, chastity—keep these rotten eggs under the feather of a hen—what would come out of them? Not a peacock! But the irony is that no one gives credit for hatching those rotten eggs—the nation does not give a hoot—that a Devi was carrying on the basket of purity. Felt like throwing that basket right in the middle of the street that every pedestrian would completely be covered in that filth. What was happening to me—All these were happening to me because of the neighbourhood of this prostitute! I suddenly remembered my friend Beena! Oh how lovely and beautiful she was! She kept on teaching for nine years—and then one day in panic married an old man—she used to say that she fell in love with him, because of his work for the nation. He spent sixteen years in prison—and once upon a time he was quite handsome too. But I knew that Beena was pretending to take shelter under such thoughts such as sacrifices for the nation, just like the Sethani who uses nude pictures for her own protection. The truth is that when hungry even a solid piece of wood tastes like a *papad*.

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I finally resolved to change my flat, otherwise this rare jewel would sink in filth, and that precious treasure for which a woman of the east gives even her life would mix in the dirt. In this world a woman's chastity is the only commodity which she sometimes squanders for a living and sometimes give her life to save it; that trump card which she produces at every crisis!!

Tired in my confused thoughts I tried to go to sleep.

Next morning when I was going out the Sethani was arguing with a fruit seller. When she saw me she turned her face like a stranger. My head was high with pride. At least she realised that I was respectable—and she a commodity of the market!

A few days after this incident my cousin with his wife visited me. Since I took the flat I was scared that he would be very angry to know that I lived in such a neighbourhood. As soon as he came laughter came tumbling down like huge rocks from the Sethani's apartment—I shut the door with contempt.

"Continuous nuisance all the time—"

"Where?"

"Up there—a wretched courtesan lives there—unending crowd all the time."

"Courtesan? Here? But that was Nigar's voice—" He said in surprise.

"Oh—So you know them—?" I gave a meaningful glance to his wife.

"Oh yes—Haven't you met them yet? I operated on Nigar's tonsils—they come from a reputable family—"

"This—this—the Sethani—"

"Yes dear—wife of Seth Abdullah—they belong to Sir Abdul Karim's family—His wife is from Delhi—belonging to the Chistia family—and—she is Razia's auntie—"

"No maternal auntie—" Razia said

And I started to hide my confusion in that admonishing earthquake. I was stunned as if I had kicked a holy book—and penitence? Penitence was beyond me.

"It must be—must be—some other apartment—" I stammered.

□

Translated by Abul K.M. Farooque

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SUNLIGHT ON THE STAIRCASE

Ram Lall

IT was very late at night—in fact two o'clock. But we were still awake. We had returned from an Urdu *mushaira* only moments ago and at daybreak we had to reach another Urdu *basti* about a hundred miles off. The taxi was waiting. We packed our beddings and Fazal, the taxi driver, stuffed them in the dicky. Now he was waiting for us to do our suitcases, airbags and briefcases. Prof. Malikzada was busy dictating to his assistant the proceedings of the four assemblies that we had that day. I was polishing my shoes. The young poet, Kalim Qaiser, had just finished washing his two bush shirts and trousers and came out of the bathroom, an innocent smile playing on his lips, and said: "Today I got thunderous applause for this couplet of mine—

> What did you say, you've burnt your fingers?
> Look yonder! the hamlets are burnt to ashes."

"Your couplet evoked the days of the riots, that's why it went straight into the heart of the audience. But don't forget it's I who had created the right atmosphere with the unexpected opening lines of my address: 'Today I'm standing before you in a city which is scared, a city which even after seven weary years, is begging the government for peace' ."

Malikzada who was lying prostrate on the unadorned cot of the guesthouse, said: "Ram Lall sahab, it's as though you put your finger on the right spot and the people were immediately drawn to you. Your words brought the memories of the riots afresh in their minds." For a few moments none of us said anything. The silence was broken by Kaukab, the student leader of the university who said: "Sir, I've written—'your words brought the memories of the riots afresh in their minds'—please go ahead." Malikzada woke up with a start, as it were: "Stupid! I was saying this to Ram Lall sahab. Cut it out. And please read out the last para."

I looked at the shine of my shoes with satisfaction and said to Qaiser: "Please recite that ghazal of yours which is so dear to me.

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Rather sing it in *tarannum.*" Qaiser's face became bathed in smiles. As he hung his clothes under the fan he began to sing:

Now it's my wont in the solitary village
Talk with the moon in love's cool shade.
It was natural to have sinned, the bodies were so close,
But an unknown force bound us to social mores.
As she fell in love, to all astrologers she implored
'Read my palms and tell me what's in store.'

Qaiser's ghazal left a deep impression and made us oblivious of the passage of time. We forgot our work and stared into the sky. He rarely got the opportunity to sing his ghazals in the assemblies as our long speeches would take up all the time. Only on occasions when the crowds got unmanageable did he get the chance to recite his verse. He was a fellow traveller for the past four days. Through dense forests and in the dreary desolation of the night he kept us in good spirits—sometimes reciting his own verse, sometimes imitating other poets which he did so well. Faiz, Jigar, Firaq, Jagannath Azad, Anwar Jalalpuri, Wasim Barelwi, Bekal Utsahi—no one could escape his parody.

Malikzada Manzoor put aside the unfinished reports scribbled by his assistant and said: "Put them away. I'll finish it in the morning as we drive along in the car." Then, as though he remembered something all of a sudden, he asked: "How much money was collected today? Open the bundle and count it." After some assemblies we would appeal to the audience to share the expenses of petrol. People rummaged their pockets and took out quarters, half rupee, one rupee, two rupees and put them in the kerchief stretched out before them by Kaukab. This was their humble but sincere contribution to the cause of Urdu. Kaukab threw a heap of coins on the floor, counted them in different denominations and said: "Someone has put a chit of paper; perhaps he mistook it for a rupee note." He held out the chit which was addressed to me. Someone had scribbled the following note: "If you've time, please come to our place for two days. I'm writing out the address. Our humble abode is only 50 k.m. away from here. I don't know when we'll meet again. Sorry for the inconvenience—Sarwat."

The name Sarwat acted as a gunpowder-filled whirligig in my brain throwing sparks as it went round and round. After sometime the gun-powder was exhausted and it stopped with the final round. But I could not remember any woman by that name. The informality of tone in the letter was also quite surprising. The assembly from

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which we returned moments ago was a well-attended one and the audience was predominantly male. Perhaps she got someone to put the note in Kaukab's kerchief in the hope that it would ultimately reach me.

My mind went back forty six years. Majid, my friend whom I used to meet often, lived at Mcleod Road in Lahore. An officer's family lived close by. There were several boys, girls and old women in the family. Sarwat was the name of one of the girls in that crowd. Majid used to call her Sherbat and gaze at her through a hole in the window. Once she showed her to me. She looked tall and graceful and was taking a stroll in the lawn along with her Alsatian. For the first time in my life I had seen the beauty of long, undulating hair. I did not know where was she or Majid now. Men forget many things but they can never forget their experience of beauty. In those moments I saw Sarwat once again walking graciously in her lawn ... I came to with a start and looked towards Manzoor Saheb and other young friends, but they were not looking at me. They had also forgotten about the chit of paper which was burning like an ember in my closed fist.

At 4 o'clock when all got on the taxi for the onward journey, I excused myself: "Drop me at the railway station. I'll meet you at the dak bungalow in Bareilly after two days. By then you'd have covered Sambhal, Sahswan and Badayun and reached there." Everyone looked up at me, surprised. They did not quite understand what I was saying. Of course, Manzoor Saheb had once left us to participate in a *mushaira* and came back the next day by bus to meet us. I smiled and said: "I've to meet someone—it's urgent. We're meeting in Bareilly in two days; that's for sure."

I took the first passenger train coming from Meerut and got off at Hakimpur. It was a small, obscure station. Besides me only three other passengers detrained there. Two of them who were peasants proceeded towards the east along the railway lines, their luggage on their heads. The third one stopped at the roadside tea stall to have tea. He had his motor cycle parked there. He often left his motor cycle there when he went to the city by train. I also stopped there to have tea, took out the chit from my pocket and enquired about the road to Mahtabpur.

The motor cyclist and the tea stall owner looked up in surprise. The tea stall owner said: "That village is quite far off, and you don't have your own conveyance either." No one spoke for a while. The tea stall owner threw some tea leaves in the boiling water and said to another person sitting there: "Did you see any *ikka* today? Perhaps

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one'll turn up in a little while. He'll have to wait."

The motor cyclist was busy dusting his vehicle. We had our tea in silence. On one side of the stall some cheap quality bidi and cigarette packets were displayed. I bought three packets of cigarette. As I lit a cigarette I held out the packet to him but he refused, saying: "No, brother, I don't smoke. Thanks." After a brief silence he said: "Actually I'm going in a different direction. I'm in a hurry, too. If you want I'll drop you on the river-bridge. You might just find an *ikka* or a lorry. Of course people in this part usually walk or ride their bicycles."

I was quite at a loss and felt that I should not have risked coming to that god-forsaken place. I had also no idea what sort of people I would meet when I reached my destination. It was certainly not an adventure of love. There was some unknown force in that chit of paper which dragged me there. Even if I turned back from that place I could not have met my companions before the next two days. Eventually I accepted the offer of the motorcyclist.

The road, though narrow, was metalled. *Tewar* plants held their heads high on both sides. There were evergreen shrubs of *vilayati ikawwa* and *laltina* at short distances. Beyond them spread out sugarcane and maize fields for miles together dotted with tall acacia and eucalyptus trees. Bullock cart tracks ran alongside the road. We did not talk on the way. Rather we could not because of the ear-splitting noise of the motor cycle. After riding for about three, four kilometres, he dropped me on a river bridge. I thanked him profusely and asked the name of the river.

"It's called Baan."

The name 'Baan' reminded me inevitably of Joan Elia and Rais Najmi. Joan composed quite a few passionate couplets about Baan as though the river were his beloved. Whenever I heard Rais reciting them, I used to get melancholy :

I'm thirsty in this ocean, Baan
Are you still flowing quietly?

# # #

I sat on the bridge quietly and stared at the flowing river. After the partition of the country Joan left for Karachi, but I could not forget him. I first heard his couplets in his own recitation. The memory of his strong, vibrating voice was still fresh in my mind, but the booming voice of Rais Najmi, Joan's ardent admirer, often seemed to overlap. It seemed as though both had the same beloved and they were reciting their couplets in one voice :

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She was from Amroha
Unique, gracious, carefree;
But Joan proved faithless to her
The wanderer that was he!

# # #

Shy, hesitant, embarrassed, worried,
Why don't you exercise restraint?
'Thou', 'he', 'you'—what's all this!
Why don't you take my name?

I sat on the bridge for a long time but no soul could be seen on the brick-built road leading to Mahtabpur. I felt restless and found myself wondering about whether I should have responded to this call or not. Well, there was no going back. I slung the air-bag over my shoulder, got up and went straight into the water with my clothes and shoes on, not caring that they would get soaked. I bent over to touch the water and moved my hand round which formed circular ripples. These ripples grew wider as they moved further away and finally merged in the still water. Then I stood up straight to see someone on a bicycle coming towards me. He took five or seven minutes to reach the river, got off his cycle on the opposite bank and kept looking me up. He was a simple villager, dressed in *lungi* and *kurta* and a muslin cap. Raising his voice a little he asked :

"Saheb, you're bound for Mahtabpur, no?"

All my anxieties were put to rest in a second. I came out of the water quickly and crossed the bridge to meet him. A carrier was attached to the back of his cycle on which there was a skein of blue thread.

"Yes, I was asked to reach there."

"Then hop on, Saheb. But you'll have to hold this bundle in your hand."

I hung the air-bag from the handle bar and bent over to squeeze the water out of my soaked trousers, then got the water out of my boots by hitting them on the ground repeatedly. Then I hopped on the cycle behind the rider holding the skein in my lap.

I had a rich reservoir of experience gathered from my sojourns at different places throughout the length and breadth of Uttar Pradesh, in connection with Urdu *tehrik*. For the first time in my life I got the opportunity to hear Urdu spoken in such varied accents which differed from village to village. I saw the thatched, mud-built shacks of the villagers with whom I sat on sack cloth on the ground and shared tea and meals. I also saw *maulvis* in many big and small

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madarsahs teaching students Urdu and how to memorise the Quran. Once at night we had stopped our taxi on the bank of a river, crossed the river on a boat to reach a *durgah* at Makhanpur. Several thousand people were waiting for us there. We visited another *durgah* which was close to a large graveyard. It was evening and the scent of joss-stick and incense filled the whole atmosphere. Thousands of women, their hair dishevelled, were in a kind of frenzy. They were beating their heads in an organised orgy. Some women had handicapped children or men in their laps who were staring at the sky helplessly. All around there were graves, shrines and institutes for religious education; mosques with their domes and minarets rising high. There were shops selling incense, joss-sticks, oil to light up lamps and sweets. Posters of different political parties like Congress, Lok dal, Janata Party, Muslim Majlis, C.P.I. etc. and advertising notices of *mushaira* and *urs* were pasted on their desks.

The bicycle rider was panting and beads of sweat were dripping down his back. I got down from the carrier and said to him: "Now you sit behind me, I'll drive."

"Oh no, Saheb. That'll embarrass me no end. If the mistress comes to know of it, I won't be able to show my face to her. You're our guest. The mistress intended to send her brother's jeep, but it had a breakdown. That's why I had to rush on my cycle. There was no other way. Please hop on. After reaching you, I've to go to Paigambarpur."

As we reached Mahtabpur I got off the bicycle as the hamlet was situated on a certain height. There were dense clusters of eucalyptus and bamboo, rising high up. Once again I slung the air-bag over my shoulder. The cyclist was walking in front of me, panting. He said: "Several centuries ago, wild tribes used to live here. They made bows and arrows with poisoned heads and supplied them to the kings. When the Rohillas came they fell out with them and were exterminated. Since then this area between two rivers became the abode of Muslims. One of them is Baan that you saw on your way; the other one has long been extinct. God knows what its name was; we've forgotten after all these years."

We passed several shrubs on the zigzag track and then reached an old-fashioned mansion that was built on a raised platform. From a distance I could see a shadow move away among the trees.

"Here you are, Saheb. This is Salimpur house. Please climb upstairs. *Salam alekum.*" He left in a hurry.

The ground under my feet was strewn with yellow leaves. The staircase had at least fifty steps and had numerous flower pots on

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both sides—some were new, some quite old; some plants were green while others looked withered. Some badly-bruised wicker chairs adorned the verandah. Both the front doors were closed. An eerie silence reigned all around. I stopped and looked about me tensely. All of a sudden I heard a female voice: "Welcome, please enter by the door on your left. Begum Saheba will meet you there." I advanced towards it. A woman hurriedly lifted the curtain on the door: "*Adaab*, I'm Sarwat. I feel ashamed that I've put you to so much trouble."

Often it happens that a guest has to pay attention to his host and the surroundings simultaneously and cannot have a proper view of either. In the room an old *durree* was spread out on the brick-built floor and at the centre there was a tattered carpet. The heavy leather sofa-set was dust-covered. The windows were large and so were the ventilators. A bougainvillea creeper crept inside through the window and its red leaves looked beautiful. The lady looked very fair and fresh though she was around fifty to fifty five. She was dressed in *shalwar* and *qamiz*. The hair on her head was a deep crimson and her dupatta slipped from her head too often.

"Please be seated. I'm so sorry to cause you trouble. When I returned last night I deeply regretted having sent that chit."

I took my eyes off the empty vases kept on tripods and stools in different corners and gathered the courage to look at her: "*Bibi*, please don't get upset. I'm glad that I've reached here. But were you sure that I'd come?"

"Why not? Though my life has had its full share of disappointments, nowadays I feel that I'll get whatever I pray for," she gushed with confidence.

A maid came into the room quietly and put a tray before me. I poured myself a glass of water and asked: "Now tell me why I've been summoned." "Sure, in a moment. My husband has to take his medicine; I'll bring him in." A tall woman, whatever her demeanour, always seems to have a royal air about her. But as Sarwat went out she looked more like a huge tree about to fall. As she left I became aware of the four almirahs standing close to the wall at my back. They were filled with books. There were also books and lots of magazines neatly arranged on desks.

The last fifteen days had been very hectic for me, spent mostly among crowds. It is not easy to remember all those unfamiliar faces, but one can never forget their kindness and warmth. The books in the almirahs were arranged in such a way that I could read the names of the authors from their spines. Whenever I go to a chemist's, I am amazed by the uncanny instinct with which the attendants lay their

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hands on the required drug with the greatest ease. They can very well shut their eyes, still they would find them. We, men of letters, inhabit a world of our own—a world made of books. I got up from the sofa to be closer to Faiz, Firaq, Krishan Chander, Manto, Bedi and Jilani Bano. Qurratulain Haider, Juginder Paul and Jamila Hashmi, too, were there—with the entire corpus of their *oeuvres* arranged systematically. That day I realised how significant it was to be among that galaxy of fellow writers. With great surprise I saw my own works of which I myself did not have such a complete set at home. It was as though I was getting to know myself all over again and it felt both strange and innocent.

Feeling someone's presence behind me I turned round to find Sarwat, smiling. I was quite surprised that both she and her husband had entered the room unperceived by me. Jahangir Khan was sitting on the sofa and was looking around vacuously. His eyes registered neither surprise nor pleasure. As I went up to shake hands with him I was shocked to discover that his hands were totally inert. Sarwat Jahangir came forward and said, "he has become senile." Tea-cup in my hand I looked at Jahangir Khan who was staring at me. Speech was lost to him but his shivering hands seemed to communicate something. Sarwat said: "A famous writer can be of great help to people. In your diary one reads such sentences as—'I recommended Mr. A for a job,' 'Mr. B. informed me about his family circumstances and sought my suggestions about how to resolve a crisis.' Do you remember you played a significant role in the marriage of one of your admirers?" We burst out laughing. I replied: "I don't remember. May be through letters I helped in the union of two hearts."

"You'd remember, I'm sure, when you had gone to Pakistan, a handicapped boy implored you to visit Bijnore to read *fateha* at his mother's grave."

"Yes, I do. Well, the boy was not really handicapped. His leg was injured in an accident, so doctors had his leg plastered. Now he is perfectly all right. I met him in an assembly at Azamgarh last month quite unexpectedly. He has grown so big in the last six years that I could not recognise him at first sight."

"In fact I asked you to come here to help me out of a problem. I hardly need to repeat that I feel greatly embarrassed."

"It embarrasses me to hear you say that again and again. I wonder if I can be of any help at all."

"You don't know what great changes you've brought in our life. No writer really knows the extent of his influence on his readers."

I looked at her for a few moments. Our compositions are the

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product of our personal vision and experiences. Of course the rewards they bring extend beyond the personal. I also remembered how some of my predecessors opened new windows to my mind enabling me to see life from a different perspective.

Sarwat Jahangir got up abruptly and went up to the books. She turned the pages of some books, then came back and said: "Ismat Chughtai was right when she remarked that many girls at Aligarh were in love with Majaz, but when it came to marriage they chose either deputy collectors or income tax officers. Everyone forgot poor Majaz who died a bachelor. However, my involvement with literature was different from the story of these girls. From childhood I had developed the habit of collecting books that I liked. Before marriage, my friends shared my passion, but after my marriage I became lonely. My husband had no interest in literature. He considered it a waste of time and money. He just tolerated it in the beginning. Slowly he began to suspect that I was in love with writers and poets though I never communicated with any of them. Neither did I meet any of them till this day. You're the first writer to step into this house. Well, for him these books and journals represented a nameless, unknown lover whom he considered his rival. And he became jealous of him. Once he tore off quite a few of my books and threw them away. We had a terrible fight. I left him taking the whole library with me to my father's house and sought divorce. Our elders intervened and the crisis was diffused. After that he never found fault with my passion for reading but he remained suspicious."

"During those days I began to feel that I was really in love with someone. He, and not my husband, was the pivot round which my interests revolved. I felt guilty and began to pay more attention to Jahangir. But the passion for books seemed to revive my past love which grew in intensity. It had no bodily form but I was irresistibly drawn towards it. A man like Jahangir could never have appreciated this inner turmoil. He was made of different stuff. I began to hate him and was ready to fight with him on the slightest provocation. By then I was fully prepared for my defence.

"Oh, how I passed those days! ... Then my daughter was born. She was angelic and chubby—a replica of my own image. Because of this Jahangir named her, Sarwat. He used to say that she was the real Sarwat who, when she grew up, would follow in his footsteps. He would not let her be infected by my craze ... But I don't think parents can mould their children the way they want. Every child is influenced by her environment and develops certain natural tendencies and aptitudes. To start with Sarwat showed interest in toys like

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other children. As she grew up she showed greater inclination towards intellectual preoccupations rather than fine arts. An orphan boy used to come to our house. Incidentally, his name was also Jahangir. His parents had died in a communal riot and his relatives migrated to Pakistan. We gave him shelter. He was of the same age as Sarwat and played with her. Gradually he developed interest in literature and so became closer to me. He would discuss literature with me and would go up to Delhi to get my favourite books which he also liked. This increased my estrangement from my husband who never cared for my passion for books. He detested Jahangir and wanted to get rid of him by any means. But he was preoccupied with his law exams; so was Sarwat. They were friends; but as far as literature was concerned, they were poles apart. Sarwat just showed enough patience to listen to our literary discourses; she never participated in them."

Sarwat suddenly looked up at her husband who was shaking his head in an effort to say something. She went up to him quickly, put a cigarette between his lips and lit it. As he smoked she kept standing by him, took the ash in her hand and put it in the spittoon. Finally she took out the butt from his mouth, threw it away and came back to me.

Head between her hands, she kept thinking for a while and then said: "I want to tell you that Sarwat kept her father happy by staying away from literature and Jahangir made me happy by his appreciation of literature. Little did we know that one day they would run away, letting us down. I don't know why it had to be so. It was a severe shock for me; for my husband's nerves, it proved disastrous. Earlier he was deaf and dumb; now he lost the use of his hands as well. Perhaps it is some kind of paralysis. This incident has left a deep scar in both of us. Now even the books do not interest me as much as they used to. I pick them up, turn a few pages and then put them away." She began to sob uncontrollably. Her beautiful hair came off the bun and began to swing along with her hiccups. Her husband kept on looking at me vacuously while his hands shivered. It seemed as though both of them were possessed.

Sarwat lifted her head after sometime, threw her hair back in one swing and said: "I want you to help me out. Please tell me if Sarwat and Jahangir met you when you had visited Pakistan. They must have. I have read in your travelogue that lots of people met you there. Jahangir is one of your great admirers. But you haven't mentioned their names anywhere. Did they ask you not to, lest we come to know their whereabouts?"

I tried to think hard. It was true that many people had met me

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there—either to enquire about their relatives in India or to send messages across to them. But I could not remember whether anyone by the name of Jahangir or Sarwat had met me there.

"Well, I carried the messages to their proper places. I've also mentioned all those people in my travelogue. I don't think they came to meet me there."

She got up abruptly and while doing up her hair proceeded towards the adjoining room. Someone sounded a horn outside. A man appeared on the verandah and said: "Hello sir, I'm going to the city. I couldn't make it to the station this morning to receive you. My sister must have told you." I went up to him and asked "Could you give me a lift, now?"

"Sure, that's why I'm here. Are you ready? Hurry up, please."

Sarwat Jahangir came back with a framed photograph. Wiping the dust off it with her *dupatta* she said: "Please take a look. Perhaps you can recognise them from the photo." Both the mother and the daughter looked gorgeous in the photograph. They looked so much like each other—almost identical. The only difference was that the mother's eyes were very intelligent while the daughter's face exuded a happy abandon. Behind them there was a youth standing, holding the handlebar of his bicycle and smiling. "This is Jahangir", Sarwat said with pride forgetting her sorrow for the moment. I returned the photograph saying: "I'll be on my way now. Your brother is giving me a lift."

She stood there, silent. I turned around to look into the room. Her husband had turned towards me, his eyes staring and his hands shaking. Before proceeding towards the jeep I gazed at Sarwat for the last time and said: "I'm not a great believer in coincidences. However I know that sometimes they play curious tricks with our lives. If you promise forgiveness, I'm ready to give you the address of your children. They're in their own country. I know them very well."

I proceeded towards the staircase leading down and expected that Sarwat would soon get over her shock and run after me. □

Translated by M. Asaduddin

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HARAMBE[1]

Joginder Paul

"WHY, dearie!—wallowing over a trifle?—Well, I know it's pain but it's born of your own body, not circumstanced by the jaws of a lion. Thank Mungu,[2] you ungrateful creature, you aren't rolling in a lion's belly.—Be patient, crazy!

"But how could you be patient? If you were, you wouldn't stay a hind: you would be a perfect woman.—You know my Mwanamke[3] so well, don't you? Even when writhing in pain, she wears a full smile. You know her smile is part of her face. Its descent from the face to the heart is so smooth. Even though her pain is excruciating, the smile abides. Yours is just a functional pain and will run its prescribed course only.

"You know how I love my Mwanamke. My love for her knows no bounds. Yet my love is independent of me: it stays home even when I've gone out. It sticks to her all the time.—Now, listen! this won't do! While I'm telling you of my Mwanamke, the din of your travail continues incessantly. If I were your stag, I would set you right instantly with a single masculine stroke. Your mate is not man enough. If he were, you would stand straight on your legs without a fuss. You are not the first one in the world to pass through this process of maternity. My Mwanamke has also delivered more than a dozen times. What happens is this: my offspring seems to be rolling down from her womb like a hillock while her smile beams even amid shadows like verdure on a mountain.

"You do sustain injuries when a whole hillock rolls down your insides, but wounds get healed up also. And, after this, you emerge afresh and amaiden.—Sometimes I beat my Mwanamke—well, I shouldn't, but I do. She looks lovely in bruises, so lovely that I start kissing the bruises and go on doing it till they turn flowers. My Mwanamke is very fertile. You sow but a tiny seed and she blossoms up. I love her so much. I am afraid what will happen to me when she is no more. When I clasp her to my bosom and penetrate in the marrow of her being, she absorbs all my pain, smiling. 'No', I tell

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her, 'do cry a little; otherwise how shall I know you are in distress?—My constant fear it is that she may die some day, smiling; while, playing around her lips, I shall be ignorantly happy that she's just asleep.—You know, if you're picqued by a thorn, a sob can also be its anodyne. A sob or so is all right; in fact it is good for cheer.—But if the whoop continues, you suffer alone and hinder others from helping you.—I say, no more of it!—Or, go and leap into that still lake to become still. If you have no resilience to create a new life, where's the justification to preserve your own? What a mother!—You cannot culture the soil unless the earth splits.—Show some fortitude, dearie. Don't forget that you've often kept yourself so cosily entwined in the legs of your stag. Now when you have had your bellyful, can't you put up with a little suffering?—Yes,—yes! I know you're suffering quite a bit, but not more than what it is. This-ness of the suffering is the thing. If you were unwilling to suffer a moment for what you relished so much every day, how would you bear fruit?

"Do you see that mango tree?—Stop crying now, you greenborn, and look at that mango tree. It's also blossoming, isn't it? It will take another full month to bear fruit. Its pain is no less and no other than yours, yet see how sweetly it endures. That's why there is a tang of honey in its fruit. It does not magnify its malaise like you do. On the contrary it keeps itself firmly planted on its roots and patiently awaits deliverance. As a reward of its forbearance, innumerable mangoes of different hues will soon be seen perched on its branches. These mangoes always look to me like infants sucking the udders of a mother sleeping.

"Enough of wailing, dearie! Look up! those whispering creepers are making fun of you.—And those shrubs are trying to muffle their laughter with a mouthful of leaves.—Of course, it's ridiculous. You have been assigned only your share of pain. Not a wee bit more! Even then, the drama you are enacting!—Why this hue and cry with your legs turned upwards? Be grateful to Mungu for all the four legs He has granted you. Stand erect and wag your tail and think cheerfully of the little one coming.—Stand up, or if that crow catches you in this posture, the telltale will croak on to summon all his clan. They're a very difficult lot, you know. If they come to believe you're dying, they'll keep flying over you till you've really died.—Good! now stand up on your legs firmly. Welldone!—Yes, like this! Although you are a hind, you're now looking like a lioness.—Now smile. Smile like my Mwanamke. Don't feel embarrassed. I'm of mankind. What am I to do with you?—Buck up! Smile more broadly. Let Mungu preserve you from the evil eye. Your smile is so lovable. If you had been a

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woman, I would have taken you readily. My Mwanamke is a very generous woman. Whatever little she eats, she always shares it. She would at once agree to share me also. "Come on", she would say. "Taste my man and see how delicious he is!"—And as both of you chewed my vital parts, I would be enjoying myself in your mouths.—Bravo! how beautiful you look!—But of what avail? You're but a hind. Had you been a half-woman, it would have been all right.

"Again?—No, stay on!—If the pain has again started shooting, sit down. The pain will subside. Don't lose your courage. Everything will be all right on its own. No-one can escape his share of unhappiness. But it's never more than his own share—as also never less than that. Yet, those who are dauntless do survive their sorrow.—Now, my Mwanamke looks so happy to you. You think she has no grief? Her quarrelsome daughter-in-law slave-drove my Mwanamke's son and took him away from her.—Yes, to give birth is painful but more painful is to suffer the pangs of separation from your own-born.—But we have to accept our grief whether we reluct or relax. So, why not relax?—Now, if you cannot help weeping, weep off all your heaviness quickly to take your turn for laughing. This is how both our joys and sorrows endure.

"No, no hullaballoo! I shall go away if you keep on crying.—You have in fact, nothing especial to weep over—Mungu has distributed sorrow amongst all his creatures very evenly. Nobody gets more than his own share.—But wait! let me first tell you a true story.—The story of our Dada!

"Do you see that last and highest of the mountain-peaks? That's our Dada.—My Mzee[4] used to tell me this story. Several centuries ago—nobody knows exactly when—Dada spat rivers of fire and lava every now and then, causing untold havoc all around. If you listen to me intently, you will get a lot of relief.—What happened was this: Mungu had entrusted Dada with the entire sorrow of the world. —Agreed, Dada is so huge but how could even he hide in his bosom the pain of the whole world? He could not but burst out.

"No, let me first complete my story. You may then cry to your heart's fill. At last Mungu thought of a solution: he spread Dada's dolour everywhere. Are you hearing, you daughter of delirium? This is how his share of dolour came to each human. Dada's a big heart but when the agony of the whole universe is stored to simmer in a single breast, even a mammoth mountain would reach its point of ebullition and burst.

"You see, all our little sufferings are indeed blessings of Mungu. The whole idea is to protect each one from more than he can bear.

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Won't we commit a sin, therefore, if we declined divine favours?—And could we live even a moment without them?—Behold, your little one is already showing up.—Steady, my dear!—Don't be nervous.—A bit more steady!—Ah! what a beauty! Welldone! It has now come out of you. The whole of it! What a handsome little life you have delivered! Not one out of my whole brood is like this lovely fawn. Yes, go on licking it. I also feel like licking it along with you.

"Every new-born looks an angel because its mother moulds it into one by continuous licking.—Go on wiping your child, dearie! You're relieved now, aren't you?—You were agitated for nothing. Mungu is so benign, you know. He takes care of all of us and makes sure that grief does not accumulate in one heart alone. Take your own case. Hardly had your pain become unbearable when this little one came out of you, flicking away its own share of pain.

"Are you hearing me, dearie? We are born only to share the sufferings of the universe. If this didn't happen, believe me motherhood would disappear and women would go barren." □

1. An African outcry which denotes: let's share our grief equitably and seek deliverance.
2. God.
3. Woman.
4. Old Father.

Translated by K.K. Khullar.

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STRANGE FACES

Jilani Bano

NAMMU began to forget the faces quite soon.

She discovered with a shock one day that she could not remember the facial features of her brothers and sisters. She was not sure she could recognise them if she met them on the street. If someone asked her whether her elder brother was dark or fair, what could she tell them? This was why she shuddered at the thought of visiting her parents. Raza felt happy thinking that she could not bear separation from him. People at her parents' house wondered at her unusual attachment to the in-laws. She could not help worrying about it and the anxiety began to tell on her health. What kind of ailment was this after all that one began to forget one's near and dear ones! A person is recognised by his face. As far as the heart is concerned, it cannot even be penetrated by X-rays. What a wonderful thing this cardiograph is! On several occasions Nammu felt like pretending illness and asking her husband, Raza, to get her cardiograph taken. She wanted to see if her heart had also begun to play tricks with her, like her eyes. One heard that on this machine the secret lines of the heart got flashed as on a cinema screen. God forbid if something deep down in her heart was exposed, causing her embarrassment before Raza!

God only knows how and when this disease had struck. She remembered well that before marriage she would recognise even casual acquaintances without the least difficulty. Whenever she saw her school fellows from a distance she would run to meet them. Whenever a neighbourhood aunt visited them she would greet her by name. She never confused the elder Tau with the younger one, although the five brothers looked so identical that even their wives often felt confused. Above all she remembered distinctly the faces of all the fourteen children of her elder sister and could tell one from the other even though their own mother was not always sure whether

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the boy before her was Mannu or Chunnu, Guddu or Pappu.

However, all this gradually changed as something went wrong with Nammu's brain, particularly that part which stores the images of people. The ailment was such that if you told people about it they made fun of you. It often happened that Raza would shout from the drawing room. 'Nammu, come and see who's here,' and she would get thunderstruck, as it were. Is it 'he'? What'll happen if I blurt out something at an unguarded moment? Or may be it's Rakshi. She had tried to trap Raza before his marriage with me. Won't she give up chasing him? ... Somehow she gathered her wits about her and entered the drawing room with trepidation. Her agitation increased when she found a strange woman standing before her. Who is she? ... who? She would be in a cold sweat, trembling all over. Her cheeks would flush a deep crimson.

"*Oui*, what's this sickness of yours that you can't bear happiness even?" the visiting lady would remonstrate smilingly, adding to Nammu's worry.

Mumani Begum? Tahir's sister?—No, must be her sister-in-law. Is her name Salma? ... Overwhelmed by her helplessness she would throw herself into the arms of the visitor and begin to sob.

"Come on, now. You shouldn't cry your heart out over a three month old embryo. Allah will give you so many that you'll forget to count them!" Everyone would burst out laughing at this sally, but Nammu's heart would be invaded by a new worry ... Shall I forget my children too? Won't I remember them? ... Oh, I remember now, she must be Chhoti Aapa. Ya Allah, why did you make all the faces so similar that inspite of all my efforts, they get mixed up.

Now, take the case of Chhoti Aapa. Is there any real difference between her and Badhi Aapa except that Badhi Aapa is slightly fairer. Of course she is much fatter than Chhoti Aapa and has to be weighed in *maunds* ... But Nammu could not tell one from the other. She only remembered that while Chhoti Aapa tried to comfort people in their distress, Badhi Aapa delighted in inflicting pain on others. Nammu could identify them only when she heard them talking to someone. Otherwise, Chhoti Aapa's nose seemed to jut out of Badhi Aapa's face while Badhi Aapa's eyes seemed to peer at her from Chhoti Aapa's head ... Now, how shall I address her—Chhoti Aapa or Badhi Aapa? Only Allah knows how people remember all these faces with their distinct features. How much space is there in a small brain that they could arrange the faces in separate shelves as books in a library?

Nammu often worried about what would happen if Raza came to discover this one day. Everyone in the in-law's family would know

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it. Her sisters-in-law had already been hostile to her, now they would make her life a hell. Raza himself (with whom she was deeply in love now) would regret having married her ... He could have married a normal, good girl instead of a half-woman like me. And how deeply he loves me. Men like him are rare who can smile each time they see their wives ...

Or may be all men are like that.

This similarity in their habits makes it difficult to distinguish them. And this is the root cause of all troubles.

During the period Nammu's marriage was being arranged she would think hard to conjure up the image of any man who would be different from 'him', but in vain. Finally she threw up her hands in despair and surrendered herself to fate.

... If it's not him, then all are the same.

It so happened that her husband laughed, talked, praised her and smiled on seeing her exactly as 'he' used to do. Nammu felt convinced that all men are alike in their habits and demonstrations of love. If this was so, then why had she cried her heart out for him? When she shared this thought with one of her friends, Aftab, she said derisively: "Admit it that you've forgotten him. Good for you. It's very difficult for a woman to keep a secret for the whole of her life."

"Oh no, don't say that. How can I forget him?"

Nammu thought Aftab was jealous of her because she herself was mad after 'him'. ... As a matter of fact I remember him at least ten times in a day. But whenever I think of 'him', it's Raza's face that I see in my mind.

That day she was alone at home, stitching tiny things. There was a knock at the door which made her wonder who it could be at that odd hour. She lifted herself, the uncomfortable bulge notwithstanding, and opened the door.

"Yes? .. who're you?"

'He' did not reply. Just lowered his head and went away. Then Nammu realised it was 'he' and no one else. But then doubts invaded her. ... Was it really 'he'? If so, why did he go away like that? Well, what else could he do seeing me in this condition. My goodness! what has happened to my eyes? Am I forgetting everyone? It seems so. What a difference between those days and today!

Nammu could only remember things said to her or a hurt caused to her. But when it came to faces, all of them looked similar to her. She wondered how people could recognise their friends and foes, looking at their faces. She would repeat to herself the names of the

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people around her in an effort to remember their faces along with the names.

Nammu envied the memory of the other people who could recognise faces immediately. As opposed to them she had to try frantically to remember the people with whom she was quite familiar. One day when she could not recognise her sister-in-law, she remarked caustically: "Bhabi has been blinded by one image, why should she take the trouble to see others!" Nammu knew that her spitfire sister-in-law held it against her that she had monopolised her brother. That naive woman believed that every married woman remained wrapped in the thought of her husband. As a matter of fact why should one waste one's energy searching for something which was right there before one. But she could not possibly have told this to her sister-in-law. People delighted in finding fault with her: "*Arré*, Najma has now become the Badhi Begum, why should she care for us now? Clad in such expensive fineries and jewellery how can she remember her poor relations?"

"For God's sake, don't talk like that!" she would say wiping her tears.

... "I haven't forgotten anyone. Something has gone wrong with my brain. May be, 'he' has exercised some black magic because often he appears in my dreams. In the house his image plays hide and seek with me—now here, there a little later. Sometimes he smiles from Raza's photograph. Sometimes he calls out, 'Nammu, Nammu.' As I turn around with a start I find Raza standing, smiling at me. I barely manage to stifle my cries of fear. Who's it—'he' or Raza? Perhaps he has assumed Raza's form."

Then one day she went secretly to Shahji along with her sister-in-law. ... Let five rupees go down the drain. I'll cetainly get some peace after meeting Shahji.

But Shahji further inflamed the fire. Advising her to fast on five successive Thursdays, he said: "You've been disrespectful to a saint, that's why you've lost your peace of mind. The person you consider your own can never be yours." She wore the five paisa talisman near her heart and cried her heart out lamenting her fate.

She did not know when she had been disrespectful to any saint. The king of jinns, clad in royal attire and face exalted, must have been going somewhere on his chariot. Perhaps he came to Nammu's house in the guise of a beggar and taking him to be a cheat Nammu shoed him away: "Yes—who're you?"

People say punishment inevitably follows if jinns are made to return empty-handed. The one who shows disrespect also remains

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empty-handed. ... That is why the one I consider my own won't be mine.

Shahji gave her four amulets to be put under the four legs of Raza's bed. And a *dua* which she should read and blow over Raza's face at dawn. By heavens, what a risky job that was! As she brought her face closer, Raza would misconstrue her gesture and respond to it in such a way that she would forget to say her *dua*.

To guard the four amulets was another difficult task. Nammu's mother-in-law's standing instruction to the sweeper-woman was that she should pull away the beds as she swept the floor so that no dirt accumulated under the legs. She behaved as though heavens would fall if an inch of the house remained unswept ... one does not know why people insist so much on external cleanliness. If they ever pry into their self, they would see how much dirt has accumulated there.

Gradually another fear began to eat into Nammu's heart and that was—what would happen if she could not recognize even Raza some day? That would spell her ruin ... Just think of it—someone has presented his heart on a platter to me, he has made my happiness his, has shed tears with me in my sorrow—and one day I may not even recognize him!

Now her whole effort was concentrated on remembering Raza's face. In the morning as he took out his scooter, Nammu would stand close and continue to gaze at him.

"What's it?" Raza would ask, taken aback. As he did not get any reply, he would take out a fiver from his pocket and give it to her, saying : "Oh, you're going to see a movie with Salma today? Go, enjoy yourself. If God has ordained fun and frolic for you, so be it!"

Nammu would take the fiver absent-mindedly. She would have liked to smile at him to show her gratitude, but her guilty conscience would not let her. She would just gaze and gaze at him trying to fix in her memory the identification marks—a scar on the right cheek, a mole on the shoulder ...

As evening approached she would leave all her work and stand at the window. She would try hard to remember whether that morning Raza had put on black trousers or white ones, but in vain. Clothes certainly helped one to identify individuals. If Raza went to the office wearing black trousers, he would return in the same clothes! Oh, what an easy way to recognize Raza!

Nammu raced back to the bedroom and opened Raza's cupboard. The pair of black trousers was not there. So she could recognize him from a distance that day. Black trousers, white shirt, scar on the right cheek, mole on the shoulder—Ya Allah, if I forget these!" Just ten

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minutes left. She was pacing up and down the room restlessly as though she were waiting for a momentous event.

The scooter-horn blared outside. She used to receive Raza outside the house and then both entered the house together clutching at the handlebar. If she could not go out to receive him on some evening, being preoccupied with work assigned to her by her mother-in-law, Raza would be in a nasty mood. That day Nammu leaped towards the door but as she saw white trousers from under the curtain, she retreated.

"What's wrong? Why did you turn away seeing me today?"

Nammu turned around hearing the familiar voice. Scar on the left cheek, mole ...

"Oh it's you! I thought someone else", she was scared stiff.

"So I've to introduce myself to you all over again," Raza gave her a sly smile as she stiffened further ... Ya Allah, what'll happen now? If he comes to know that I could not recognize him?

Having changed his dress Raza came out and looked her over.

"Why are you looking so shabby? Don't you get time to do up your hair or change your dress? I told you a hundred times that churidars and shirts are in fashion nowadays. But you're always wrapped in your tattered sarees!" Raza proceeded towards the bathroom, muttering to himself.

The next day Nammu decked herself up with great care ... How shall I look in churidars and tight-fitting shirts? They are meant for teen-agers. I don't know in what different forms he wants to see me.

Nammu was still before the mirror when she heard Raza's voice.

"Aha, Rakshi's here today—come to bring us good luck!"

Nammu turned around. Raza was stunned as though he was hit by someone.

"God forbid! I couldn't imagine that it's you. I forgot ... It seemed as though ... Rakshi ... " Raza began to laugh but Nammu was in tears. ... Oh no, he also does not recognize me. He just makes a pretence of love. Shahji was right. The one I consider my own won't be mine. Now he'll always say: "Rakshi has come today to bring us luck. Nammu, I've forgotten you." □

Translated by M. Asaduddin

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SHADOWLINES

Surinder Prakash

It was a day in summer. The courtyard was sprinkled with water and the string cots were laid at their usual places. Baoji was sitting on a wicker chair smoking his hookah. After every puff, wreaths of smoke went up from his mouth. He was unusually quiet as was the atmosphere around him. Only the gurgling noise of the hookah could be heard from time to time. The cloud of smoke emanating from Baoji's mouth filled the rooms and the courtyard and then got dissolved in the atmosphere. All of a sudden he cleared his throat noisily and called out :

"Mohammad Bakhsh! O Mohammad Bakhsh!"

Mohammad Bakhsh's voice came from a distance: "Yes, Baoji?"

"What're you doing, son?" Baoji asked.

"Nothing, Baoji, I'm playing hopscotch."

"Then come son, revive the hookah."

Baoji took three or four deep puffs and put away the pipe. Then he muttered, "You are the only one", as he twisted his hands.

Mohammad Bakhsh came and took away the cap and the bottom of the hookah. He was dressed in a white *shalwar* and a striped shirt which he had been wearing for the last three days. Maaji's standing instruction was that no member of the house should take off his suit before seven days.

Mohammad Bakhsh was almost like a member of our family. His father, Alladitta and mother, Hari Begum fell victims to plague when he was four years old. Both husband and wife worked in our house. Alladitta looked after the daily shopping while Hari Begum dusted the rooms and wiped the floors etc. I do not know what salary Maaji gave them but they were happy. When they sat down to their meals they would mutter: "Ya Allah, a thousand thanks to you for providing us our meals. May you grant prosperity to him who has given us our bread."

Mohammad Bakhsh was then a boy of about four years. He

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would sit cross-legged before Hari Begum who would put lumps of food in his mouth at brief intervals. They lived in a small cottage near the courtyard. In summer when they had had their meals they would sit on the cot outside the hut. Their presence in the dark and their talk seemed to create an aura of mystery. Mohammad Bakhsh would be sleeping on the cot beside Hari Begum. One day she asked her husband: "*Oye Datia,* when Mohammadu gets a wife he won't sleep besides me, no?"

Alladitta would answer, "Wife, your thinking goes quite far."

"What can I do? I've such a great desire ..."

Then she would begin to pat the sleeping Mohammad Bakhsh with her hand and her voice would slowly drown in the enveloping darkness.

In the Mohalla everyone called him Mohammadu which angered Baoji: "Stupid! that is what they are. Mohammad is the name of a great personality who was blessed by God. One should not distort his name like this!" Sometimes he would reproach Mohammad Bakhsh: "Hey Mohammad Bakhsh, why don't you tell people to take your name properly?" Mohammad Bakhsh would lower his head and answer helplessly: "What can I do Baoji? Who cares what I say? Who'll listen to me?" "Yes, you're right. No one listens to anyone else in this world. Everyone goes his own way." Baoji would utter each word distinctly holding the hookah pipe in hand.

When Pakistan was created we, like the millions of Hindus in Pakistan, were faced with a grevious problem. For a few days Baoji was in a state of total confusion. One day he returned home alongwith several other Hindu gentlemen. They were talking in subdued voices: "So we discover it today that *they* are different from *us.*" Baoji said: "Fact is, we've become helpless. No one is listening to us. No one wants to know our point of view. We have surrendered to the politicians the right to decide our destinies." Finally it was decided that we should leave our own land and migrate to India. But one issue had still remained unresolved of which the solution was to be found by us and not politicians. This was Mohammad Bakhsh.

Hari Begum, Mohammad Bakhsh's mother, had died three days before Alladitta's death. She implored her husband to look after Mohammad Bakhsh after her death. After that when Alladitta himself was on his deathbed, he put Mohammad Bakhsh in Maaji's arms. His condition was so serious that he could not utter a single word. Only the movement of his eyes communicated what he wanted to convey. Seeing this Baoji put his hands on Mohammad Bakhsh's head and his eyes became moist. Alladitta said his death-prayer himself

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and breathed his last.

Baoji and Maaji thus made an implied promise to Alladitta for Mohammad Bakhsh's upbringing. He used to study with me at the Sanatandharma High School. He would not attend the period on Hindu religion. Instead he would study the *Quran* with the maulvi of the nearby mosque for two hours everyday. Sometimes he would discuss with Baoji specific points on religion. Baoji would affectionately give his own opinion on the point. He was quite interested in Islamic studies.

So how was the issue to be resolved? Mohammad Bakhsh had no one to call his own with whom we could leave him. As Pakistan was created for Muslims, Mohammad Bakhsh, on principle, should have stayed in Pakistan. But ... it was difficult, very difficult for him to stay there. Eventually the matter was put before him. He remained silent for a while, then said: 'who do I have here to call my own, Baoji? Who'll give me shelter? I'd better go along with you, wherever you go.'

It was decided that we would take Mohammad Bakhsh along with us to India. On the following day all the Hindus of the town began to assemble in the Arya High School where a camp was put up. Close by was Islamia High School where refugees from India had been lodged. The living conditions at both the places were the same. It is futile to try to describe them. We also reached the camp along with some essential household stuff which we put in a corner. We made a *chulha* for cooking and began to stay there. Every day we would see military trucks lining up to ferry refugees across to India and the Indian refugees from Islamia School proceeding to different parts of the town with their belongings. We would sit silently waiting for our turn. The government of Pakistan had deployed a unit of Beluch army for our security. So there was no fear on that count.

On the penultimate night of our departure an important officer of the Beluch army came to interrogate the refugees about their belongings. He would isolate some articles from the luggage of each refugee and earmark them as forbidden. As he came to us for interrogation the military officer asked :

"What's your name, please?"

"Kirpa Ram," Baoji answered.

"Who else are with you?"

"Me, my wife, three children. And Mohammad Bakhsh ..."

The officer was startled. "What do you mean?"

"Me, my wife, three children and Mohammad Bakhsh," Baoji repeated.

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"Mohammad Bakhsh!" the officer uttered the name with special emphasis indicating surprise. "Who is this Mohammad Bakhsh?" Before Baoji could say anything, Mohammad Bakhsh replied:

"It's me, sir. I'm also going with them."

"But you're a Muslim. Why do you have to go?"

"With whom shall I stay here, sir? I've been with these people since my birth."

"Stay with your parents."

"They are dead. I was then four years old."

"Oh!" the officer began to ponder, then said abruptly: "But why ... why should you go with them? All the Muslims from there are coming here. And you ..."

"Sir, I've no one here to call my own. Where shall I stay? How shall I manage my food and clothing? And how shall I continue my studies?"

"Everything will be managed. Pakistan will look after everything. This is Pakistan's responsibility. Don't you worry."

"If I don't worry now, dear sir, I'll have to worry throughout my life."

The officer was not impressed by our or Mohammad Bakhsh's arguments. When Mohammad Bakhsh was ordered to sit at a distance from us, he clung to us and wept bitterly. We also wept profusely. We had never thought that a day would come when Mohammad Bakhsh would be separated from us. He had become a part of our daily life ... A soldier was ordered to take him to the Muslim camp at the Islamia High School. It was a strange scene. He was separated from us as a calf is separated from its mother.

The lorry moved on. Baoji was sitting silently. Maaji remonstarted: "What're you pondering over?"

Baoji gave a start and said: "Ram Pyari, I was thinking how people would address Mohammad Bakhsh now—Mohammadu or Mohammad Bakhsh!!"

There was silence once again. The lorry moved on—towards India. We reached Amritsar where we got the permit made and then proceeded towards Lucknow. One of Baoji's cousins, Gurdayal Singh, had already reached Lucknow. The day we reached there we found Gurdayal Singh waiting for us in the railway station, his son Gurpreet Singh clutching his hand. He was living in a house abandoned by a Muslim at Ganeshkhand Road. As we reached the house Maaji embraced his wife warmly and both women wept bitterly. Then we had a wash and bath, had our lunch and went to sleep. We slept till late in the afternoon. It seemed as though we were totally exhausted

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after a long voyage. As all got up we began to talk about different things. In the midst of the talk Gurdayal Singh asked Baoji how much money he could bring from Pakistan. He told that a good piece of property was on sale near Aminabad Chowk. As Baoji agreed to the idea of buying it up both went to see it the next day.

There was a big mansion there known as 'Haji Mohammad Husain Ki haveli' which was now owned by the Haji's son, Jahandida Husain. Jahandida Husain wanted to leave his homestead and go to Pakistan. He always believed that the Muslims of India should have a homeland. He participated whole-heartedly in the creation of Pakistan. Like many other Muslims he believed that at least the district of Lucknow, if not the whole U.P., would be included in Pakistan because it was the nerve centre of Islamic culture. But it did not happen. When the creation of Pakistan was announced, the Muslims of Pakistan were sorely disappointed. Haji saheb died on August 17, 1947. Now it was October. Jahandida Hussain realised that the pomp and grandeur with which he had lived so far would not be possible now. He had thought that he would spend the rest of his life in Pakistan. He would be given some high position and the courtyard of his mansion would remain filled with people seeking his audience. But things went contrary. People who regarded him as their natural leader and were ready to sacrifice their lives at his bidding turned away from him. Now they believed that Jahandida Hussain was the root cause of all their troubles.

Jahandida Hussain wanted to sell off his father's mansion but no local Hindu was ready to buy it. They regarded him as the enemy of the composite culture of Lucknow. It was an impasse. If any outsider wanted to buy it the local people scared him away.

Gurdayal Singh thought of a plan to buy up the mansion without anyone knowing it. Word would be spread around that Jahandida Hussain had allowed a wretched Hindu family to stay in his mansion. After tortuous negotiations the deal was struck at twenty two thousand rupees. Relevant papers, receipts etc. were arranged secretly. Baoji was given the power of attorney and our family shifted to the mansion at night.

Jahandida Hussain sold his mansion on one condition: Of the twelve rooms in the mansion he would keep one in his possession where he would store his own things. The doors would be padlocked and he would keep the keys. Baoji agreed to this condition at the instance of Gurdayal Singh and did not care to know what stuff Jahandida Hussain had put in the room before he left India whose key would remain with him in Pakistan.

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Jahandida Hussain was then about thirty, thirty five years old. Haji saheb had a fairly old wife who was married to him in his childhood. After that he had married twice. One of the wives gave birth to Jahandida Hussain and passed away. Haji saheb divorced the third wife after paying off her *mehr*. The first wife, Razia Begum, refused to go to Pakistan with Jahandida Hussain and left for Gorakhpur, her old homestead. She had some land there which she had inherited from her forefathers.

The family now consisted of Jahandida Hussain, his wife Naima, and their twin sons, Yaqub Hussain and Ayyub Hussain who were six years old. Besides them there was an old maidservant. All of them were fully prepared. There was an interval of three or four days between their departure for Pakistan and our shifting into the mansion. Meanwhile we got intimately acquainted with them. Both Yaqub and Ayyub were very loveable boys. Both were the same age and looked identical. We could tell one from the other only by the colour of their hair. While one had black hair, the other had grey hair and eyebrows.

We saw them off at the station as they got on the train bound for Delhi. On the railway platform we clasped one another in arms and began to weep uncontrollably. They cried over their sorrow, we cried over ours. Baoji and Jahandida Hussain made a solemn promise to let each other know about the well-being of family members through letters. Finally the train steamed off—chugh, chugh, chugh...

We began to live in one part of the house. In the front part Baoji opened his traditional dry fruit shop. The business picked up at great speed and we began to live comfortably. Slowly we began to forget the town we had left behind, its pace of life, trade etc. So much so that Baoji almost forgot Mohammad Bakhsh and the promise he had made about him.

Then one day Jahandida Hussain's letter came from Karachi. In it he wrote that he had reached the new land through the grace of Allah. He had been alloted a large house and a shop by the government. He had opened a shop of Lucknowi *Chikan* in Karachi. He was lucky to get the services of several women from Lucknow who were experts in the art of embroidery. People had begun to fancy the dresses made by them. Everything was allright in the family. Naima was fine, Yaqub Hussain and Ayyub Hussain were in fine fettle. They had been admitted to a reputed school there. Their old servant, Ruqaia, had also sent her greetings.

Baoji replied to the letter immediately. He intimated that Jahandida Hussain's Badi Amma, Razia Begum, had passed away in the

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village. The property had been acquired by the custodian and would, in all probability, be allotted to an appropriate person.

No reply to this letter came for quite some time. We got to know that Razia Begum's paternal property had been allotted to a Hindu refugee. Jahandida Hussain was informed about this in another letter.

One day Baoji said rather abruptly: "It is strange. Mohammad Bakhsh appeared in my dream last night. By god's grace he has grown up to be a hefty young fellow. He has taken up the business left by us and has now become an experienced tradesman. He is now married with children. As I was going to the market he saw me. Immediately he came towards me, touched my feet and threw himself into my arms. Then he took me to his house where I met his wife and children. He poured red-coloured sherbat into a big glass and offered me to drink. Later on we went to his shop. The board hanging from the wall read—'Mohammad Bakhsh and sons" I was very happy."

That day Baoji wrote a letter to Jahandida Hussain asking him to look for a youngman named Mohammad Bakhsh in Karachi. After a long time the reply came intimating that Mohammad Bakhsh could not be traced. It also informed that Jahandida Hussain had become the leader of the Indian refugees, the *mohajirs* in Karachi and was very active in local politics. Baoji was glad that Jahandida Hussain was active in politics there and was fighting for the protection of the rights of the refugees though he was quite sad that nothing could be heard of Mohammad Bakhsh.

Then something strange happened one day. Baoji was sitting in the shop looking after the routine business when he called Maaji and said: "Ram Pyari, make a cup of tea please." Maaji prepared the tea and carried it to him. He took a sip, belched ... then smiled and said, "Allright, I should be on my way. When you come, bring some news of Mohammad Bakhsh." The next moment he breathed his last.

Now I, Indernath, look after the family and the trade. I am married with two children—Pinky and Raju. I have got my sister married. She is happy in her house. My younger brother, Jitender, has finished his studies to become an engineer. He is working on a government project. He has married into a good family and has a son, Rajesh, who is too small to go to school.

There was a letter from Karachi to inform that Jahandida Hussain was no more. The other members of the family are allright. Maaji left for her heavenly abode without being able to know anything about Mohammad Bakhsh. Things have changed considerably in our house. Ayyub Bhai's letters come frequently from Karachi to which

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I reply regularly. Of course the language of the letters has changed. Formerly they were in Urdu, now they were written in English. Well, what difference does it make? One can get to know the meaning of words, in any case. Now he dictates his letters to his secretary who types them out and posts them, like other business letters. About Yaqub Bhai he informed that he has become quite a name in local politics, that the people of Pakistan do not take to the *mohajirs* kindly. Yaqub Bhai also brings out a weekly, *Al Mohajir,* in both Urdu and English. This paper has become quite popular with Indian refugees and may soon be reincarnated as a daily. Yaqub Hussain himself will be its chief editor. The children of Yaqub Hussain and Ayyub Hussain are fine and have sent their greetings.

I am thinking—one generation has passed away. The second generation is at an advanced stage. And the third generation has just begun to blossom forth in our courtyards and is sending across greetings. My son, Raju, has returned from school and is sitting by me, in the shop. He tenderly massages my feet and asks:

"Daddy, how's the pain in your leg?"

"There's a slight improvement," I answer.

"Why don't you consult a specialist? Get a general check up done as well. You'll get to know the actual cause of pain." "You're right. I should know the cause of the pain." Then he looks towards the almirah at the corner where Baoji's ornate hookah was kept. I also follow his gaze. I seem to hear the growling noise of the hookah of which Raju seems unaware.

"What's this contraption, daddy?" asks Raju still looking at the hookah.

"This ... is hookah, son. Its lower part is filled with water and its cap is made of clay. Tobacco is put in the cap and then live embers are put on the tobacco. Your grandpa used to smoke it. Mohammad Bakhsh used to prepare the hookah for him!"

"Then?"

"Then smoke would come out of his mouth."

"What a funny thing!" he says and proceeds towards the inner apartments. He stops at the door and says: "Daddy, I'll come back after doing my homework." He does not ask anything about Mohammad Bakhsh. Perhaps he is not interested in knowing about him.

For a long time no letters have come from Ayyub Bhai. Perhaps he has become too busy in his work. *Al Mohajir* must have become a daily now, coming out both in Urdu and English. Yaqub Bhai may have become a known political figure. I carefully go through newspapers, especially if there is any news about Pakistan. Besides, there is

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one Farooqi Saheb among my friends whose sister and sister-in-law live in Karachi along with their children. Sometimes they phone up Farooqi Saheb who tells me in detail about everything. One day he asks abruptly :

"Inder Bhai, why do you take so much interest in the happenings of Pakistan? Who is there after all that you feel so concerned?"

"Mohammad Bakhsh," I tell him unwillingly.

"Mohammad Bakhsh! Who is this Mohammad Bakhsh?"

"Well, Mohammad Bakhsh is Mohammad Bakhsh; that's all." He is taken aback by my reply.

From the newspaper it is apparent that the relation between the two countries is becoming more and more tense. Pakistan has closed its consulate in Bombay where the consul general was Shahryar Rashid. He was the son of N.M. Rashid, the pioneer of new poetry in Urdu. I still remember a poem by N.M. Rashid whose title is, 'A stranger in Iran.' Time passes imperceptibly and we automatically move on our destined way. Pistachios do not come from Afghanistan via Pakistan anymore. They now come through other routes.

A letter comes from Ayyub Bhai unexpectedly. From London, not Karachi. He is in London with all the members of the family and wants to come to India. I wrote back promptly urging him to come. Me, my wife Anuradha and our two children, Pinky and Raju, would be eagerly waiting for them.

We tidied up the house and arranged things in proper order. Two rooms were earmarked for them. If there was anything lacking in the kitchen, we got it from the market. I asked the driver to get the car cleaned and serviced. Then one night the telephone rang. Anuradha picked up the receiver and said to me, "for you, from London." I took the receiver from Anuradha and began to listen. Ayyub Bhai was on the phone. He informed me that he was reaching Delhi by Air India flight after three days and would reach Lucknow on his own. But I was so eager to meet him that I reached Delhi by car along with my wife and children.

When the airbus touched the runway, I missed a heartbeat. Then the door opened and passengers began to come out. I could not identify Ayyub Bhai in the crowd of passengers and was almost in tears. The passengers picked up their luggage and began to check out. I saw a handsome man of my age with grey hair and eyebrows come out and look about him anxiously. I ran towards him and, to make sure, asked: "Ayyub Bhai?" He took me in his arms and pressed me to his chest while he muttered: "By God, I knew that we'd meet in Delhi. Aha, what great joy!"

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An unusual aroma emanated from Ayyub Bhai's body. I felt the same warmth in his hug as I formerly experienced when embracing my father, brother or Mohammad Bakhsh. "I could not stay at home", I replied slowly. We disengaged ourselves and began to stare at each other. Then I realised that there were two women and five children accompanying him. He introduced them to me :

"These are my two children and these three children are late Yaqub Bhai's. This is your Bhabi, and this is the widow of Yaqub Bhai." I was thunderstruck.

"What do you mean, Ayyub Bhai?" I asked.

"I'll tell you," he said sorrowfully and we were on our way. We hired two cars from Delhi and proceeded towards Lucknow by road.

On the way Ayyub Bhai told me that in Karachi tension between the local people and the *mohajirs* had mounted. Bloodshed and arson had become common occurences. Since Yaqub Bhai was at the forefront of the movement spearheaded by the Indians and brought out two dailies, he became an eyesore of the opponents. During the last riots in Karachi, a group of musclemen attacked his house and press. Yaqub Bhai did not care for his personal safety and faced them unarmed. Three shots pierced through his chest and he fell a martyr immediately. His security guards also fired in return and then the mobile police force also reached there. By then it was too late. His house, office and press became a shambles. For their safety it became necessary to leave the country. No other course was open. London seemed to be the most safe place. Then he thought of coming to Lucknow, the land of his forefathers.

"Oh God! the pity of it!" I said regretfully.

"Yes, something has gone wrong with the world. Everywhere Muslims have become thirsty for the blood of their own brethren," said Ayyub Bhai looking out through the windscreen. Perhaps he was watching the harvest field which spread far and wide.

When we reached Lucknow my own relatives and the relatives of Haji Saheb and Jahandida Hussain converged on my house. After the reunion some became sorrowful while others, willy nilly, burst into tears. There were some who began to whisper among themselves.

The following day Ayyub Bhai took the key from his wife and opened the room where his father had kept some of his belongings. He went in along with other members of his family and children. Some moments later we heard them crying. I peeped in to see what was the matter. There were old books, photographs and dresses spread before them. A big portrait was lying on one side. It was Wajid Ali Shah in Kathak *mudra*.

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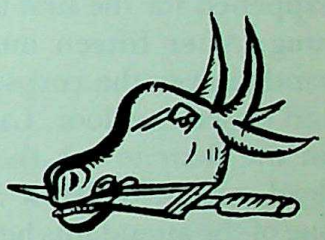
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After weeping copiously for sometime they came out. Their eyes were still moist. They did not close the room. The widow of Yaqub Bhai said: "Inder Bhai, this room needs tidying up."

"Sure, Bhabi saheba, it'll be done immediately," responded my wife.

Next day they went to the tomb of Hazrat Bibi and visited all the old places and *imambaras* of Lucknow. They read *fateha* at each place. The cycle of prayers continues till today. From the haveli of Haji Mohammad Hussain, built at the spot where Ganesh Khand Road ends and Aminabad begins, some mysterious shadows come out at the crack of dawn everyday and can be seen returning to it at sundown. □

Translated by M. Asaduddin



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VULTURES

Ali Imam Naqvi

BOTh were stunned by this unusual spectacle. They put the stretcher on the ground abruptly, stared at the corpse and then looked at each other's eyes questioningly. Their eyeballs kept rolling for a long time and when they stopped, their shoulders heaved imperceptibly. They pressed their neck veins and pulled their jaws right and left. Then they lifted their eyes to see the dense cluster of trees of the *doongarwadi,* the Parsi cemetery.

Not a single vulture was there! As far as one could see! This had happened for the first time. Two hours before, the warning bell had rung. After fifteen minutes the funeral attendants of *baoli* no. 2 handed over the corpse to them. They took it inside the *baoli* area and closed the door. Later Feroze Bhatina opened the small window on the door to ask the attendants about the close relatives of the dead, and said: 'How about the tips—did they give any?' Smiling, one of the attendants held out two ten-rupee notes to Bhatina. Quickly he pocketed one note and passed the other one to his companion, Hermoz. Then he shut the window. 'Oh God!' Hermoz lifted his head to have a glimpse of the sky through the dense, tall trees. Then he motioned to Bhatina with his eyes. Both bent over, lifted the stretcher and walked towards the *baoli.*

"Feroze"—Hermoz addressed his companion, as they walked.

"What's it?"

"How long we ... do this work?"

"Get going. Don't get on my nerves."

"*Yaar*, can't we find some other job?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything. Simply asking you."

"That's all?"

"That's all. I swear by Zaratustra"—he swore lifting his head towards the sky. They were silent for a while. Then Bhatina said:

"Look Hermoz, the Parsi Panchayat has brought me up. My fate is rotten, you see ... How about you?"

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"Same story here. Not much difference. But to tell you the truth I'm fed up. Absolutely fed up."

Their talk remained inconclusive as they had reached the *baoli*. Hermoz kicked the door open. The next moment one of them was standing at the head of the corpse, the other at the feet. The face of the dead body looked absolutely white, smeared as it was with curd. Hermoz lifted the corpse's head as Bhatina pulled the shroud from under it. By turns they reverentially touched the corpse's feet, then touched their hands to their eyes and chest and got up. There was a handkerchief tied to the *Kasti* string in the waist to cover the private parts which they left undisturbed. Then they returned to their room and sat on chairs before the table. Moments later Hermoz put a wine bottle on the table and both filled their glasses. Feroze Bhatina tossed a piece of *arvi* roll into his mouth and said :

"Hermoz"

"What's it now?"

"What kind of life is this?"

"What's wrong?"

"*Baoli* no. 1, 2, 4 ... the bell ... bastard ... and."

"And ... ?"

"Yeah, and ..."

"And ... What?"

"Corpses ... corpses .. still more corpses ..."

"I don't understand."

"This is the life of a Parsi, you see."

"Life?"

"Yeah."

"What's wrong?"

"The youth passes superfast and the old age rumbles on like a freight train."

"True. Absolutely true."

"Yea. Absolutely true."

Both kept up the litany of 'true, ture' as they drank on. A little later they began to sob. After about an hour the bell went off again. A corpse was being sent from *baoli* no. 4.

"Praise be to Zaratustra who's provided for more wine!"

"Come on, *yaar*. Walk fast."

They walked towards the main gate of the *baoli*. The door opened once again and the stretcher was slid outside. After a while the corpse of *baoli* no. 4 was in their hands. One of the attendants accompanying the corpse flashed two ten-rupee notes which were snatched by Hermoz instantly. They closed the door, lifted the stretcher and advanced

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towards the *baoli*.

"Hermoz"

"What's it?"

"One day we, too, will die like this, no?"

Hermoz stopped in his tracks, then turned to look at Feroze and asked him in a somewhat harsh voice :

"Why did you say this?"

"Everyone has to die some day."

"That's right. But I'm not ready to die yet."

"Ready? What do you mean?"

"Shut up, you oaf. What've we seen in this life so far? Corpses, corpses and more corpses—and vultures. The best we can think of is that wretched wine from Sitara Road ... crude, mixed with ammonium chloride ... ten rupee notes. I ask you, is this life?"

Feroze did not know what to say. He stared at Hermoz.

"Tell me brother, is this life?"

"What can I say? I only know that when my turn comes, I'll have to go. If I die, someone else will take my place. When you die, somebody will take your place, too."

"Shut up, you fool. Bastard. Pig." Hermoz yelled out.

"Don't yell, *yaar*. What to talk of life, we've death at our hands to dispose of."

Both reached the *baoli* silently. And when they opened the door of the *baoli* ...

Both were stunned by this unusual spectacle. They put the stretcher on the ground abruptly, stared at the corpse and then looked at each other's eyes questioningly. For a considerable time their eyeballs kept rolling and when they stopped, their shoulders heaved imperceptibly. They pressed their neck veins and pulled their jaws right and left. Then they lifted their eyes to see the dense cluster of trees of the *doongarwadi*. There was not a single vulture in sight.

This happened absolutely for the first time. There were corpses to be eaten, but no vultures! Usually, it happened that within twenty, twenty five minutes of the disposal of the corpses, the vultures would make short work of them. As they saw the vultures return, they'd go to the *baoli* and douse the skeleton with acid. The skeleton would turn into fine dust and go deep under the *baoli*—deep down it. No one knew where. On the days when there was no dead body, the Parsi Panchayat would buy a goat and hand it over to Hermoz and Bhatina to feed the vultures, lest they leave, driven by hunger. But this was so very unusual. The corpses were there, but no vultures to feed on them!

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They kept staring at each other for quite a while. Then they put the second corpse on the *baoli* netting and gave each other a deep questioning look.

"What do you think? Shall I go and inform Kaikobad?"

"Yea. Go."

He went to his room and pushed the emergency button. In the *doongarwadi* office the red bulb on the wall began to blink. Shocked and confused, the clerks rushed out. Similar bulbs in the *baolis* also began to blink. The clerics stopped reading from the scripture. Dogs loitering around the *baolis* slunk into corners out of scare. The mourners accompanying the dead got upset and rushed out of the *baolis*. Everyone seemed to ask the same question :

"What's up?"

Kaikobad rushed out, looked up at the sky and went back in. The crowd surrounded him, there was great commotion. In reply, he announced :

"The vultures have gone away"

"Vultures gone away?"

"Gone away?"

"But why?"

"Something is going to happen!"

"But what?"

As soon as the secretary of the Parsi Panchayat received the telephone from Kaikobad, wrinkles appeared on his forehead. When the talk was over he put the receiver on the cradle and called up the director on the intercom. An emergency meeting was called right away. The matter was put up before the board of directors. The big question was:

"Where have the vultures gone?"

"Where have they gone?" the police commissioner's surprise was palpable on the telephone.

"Yes, all our vultures have left", the Chairman of the Parsi Panchayat confirmed, stressing each syllable. Then, as he listened to the police commissioner attentively for a long time his face changed colours. As the police commissioner rang off, he put the receiver down. He felt the intent gaze of all the other directors on him and reported the gist of the talk to them. There was anxiety writ large on every face shot through with only a slight feeling of reassurance. The secretary rang up the *doongarwadi*. Then Kaikobad briefly summed up the talk between the police commissioner and the Chairman to the honourable clerics and others present. From the clerics, the news travelled to *baoli* attendants and from them to Feroze Bhatina and

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Hermoz. Bhatina listened to the whole story with rapt attention; then he looked up at the sky, clearly visible through the trees. There was not a crow even, neither a kite, nor a vulture!

All of a sudden both got up with a start as the emergency bell of *baoli* no. 3 rang out indicating that another corpse was being sent. The corpse arrived. The attendant held out two fifty rupee notes to Bhatina this time. As they pulled the corpse in, Bhatina scowled and addressed his companion:

"Hermoz"

"What's it?"

"Why all the Parsis have decided to die today?"

Hermoz did not reply. He was looking at the sky. Not a vulture anywhere. And the corpses kept on multiplying.

"Where have the vultures gone after all?"

"The police commissioner said all the vultures have thronged the Kharki, Ravivar Peth and Somvar Peth neighbourhoods."

"Why?"

"Those stupid Hindus and Muslims are at each other's throat once again. The bastards have torched everything—houses, shops even ambulances. The streets are littered with corpses and the vultures are having a feast on them. And that police commissioner ... he says that the vultures will return of their own accord when the streets are cleaned up."

Even if the streets are cleaned up, so what?

"So what if the vultures return this time? ... This is India ... Bastards! they've a riot here everyday; everyday a fire ... Everyday people die ... so? ... So what? ... They say the vultures'll come back ... Vultures!" □

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THE NEWS

Salam Bin Razak

THOSE four were sitting with their eyes glued to the television screen. The news was being telecast as usual. But the news they were waiting for did not reach yet.

"The news-bulletin has come to an end. Please listen to Rajaram's *thumri* now."

They looked at one another. Questions floated in their eyes like bubbles on water and vanished.

"Put it off, *yaar*", one said irritably.

"Have been hearing these things for years", said another one in the same vein.

"T.V., Radio, Newspaper—everything has become an extension of His Master's Voice. Bastards."

"*Yaar*, You people take news seriously," the fourth said with a cynical smile. The other three fell silent. Master Rajaram was playing his *thumri*: *How long shall I wait for thee?*

The foursome listened to the *thumri* for a while.

"Put it off, please," the first one said, piqued.

"*Yaar*, I put the T.V. off and what if that news is broadcast in the meanwhile?"

"But when will it be broadcast? We've been waiting for ages."

The news is that it may be broadcast any moment tonight."

"Isn't it also *news*?"

The other three startled and began to gawk at him.

"You buggers! Why do you laugh at everything? According to Aristotle only fools do that."

"*Yaar*, don't mention him. I don't like him at all."

"Why?"

"You ask why? He tutored Alexander throughout his life and yet could not make him a radical."

"But his saying that he who laughs without reason is a fool is correct."

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"I see! If it is so, then tell me why does Mona Lisa laugh?"

"Which Mona Lisa?"

"That one—by Leonardo."

"You bugger! She doesn't laugh, she smiles."

"And what's the difference, pray, between a laugh and a smile?"

"Cultured people smile and uncultured people laugh. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are we the cultured ones, then?"

"You think we are not?"

"Are you sure that we are?"

"Why not? There is not a shred of doubt that we are cultured."

"Do you know the feeling of certainty springs from ignorance, not wisdom?"

"O.K. Still I tell you with confidence that we are cultured."

"I see. Can you give it in writing on a stamp paper, then?"

"Which sentence?"

"That we are cultured."

"You're talking rot."

"Why, if you are so sure, then what's the harm if you give it in writing?"

"No harm as such. But ... look, what I mean is that we are almost cultured."

"That means you don't believe in your statement firmly."

"O.K., I'll write, but I won't sign it."

"Ha! Didn't I tell you you don't believe in it!"

Rajaram was singing: *How long shall I wait for thee?*

"*Yaar,* if you don't put the T.V. off, at least reduce the volume."

"Does it hurt you?"

"We feel disturbed."

"As if your talk is of any worth!"

"Whatever the worth, it's much more worthwhile than Rajaram's *thumri.*

"After all, *yaar,* how long shall we listen to this *thumri*? I feel bored."

"Come on *yaar.* This is the favourite *thumri* of this family. Before Rajaram, his mother used to sing it and before her, his father ..."

"But, there's a limit *yaar.* I feel I've been listening to this blasted music since I've grown up."

"I've my doubts."

"About what?"

"About the fact that you've really grown up."

"I tell you, none among us has really grown up. Just think, where

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we would be today if we had acted a little sensibly!"

"Where indeed?"

"At least we would not have been where we are."

"Hey you! where are we really and where we wouldn't be?"

"Can't be said for sure. It's something that deserves thinking."

"Then let's think."

"Wait a bit. Let the news come, then we'll start thinking."

"But are you sure that the news is to be telecast today?"

"Of course."

"But when?"

"Look *yaar*, when you've waited for so long, there's no harm if you wait for a little while more."

"That we have to. But somehow I don't feel sure that the news will really be telecast."

"You're a born sceptic."

"Have been let down so many times that all my complacency has vanished."

"We have to wait, in any case."

"But our fifth comrade hasn't arrived yet."

"Yeah, it's a long time he went."

"It's a 'dry' day. He'll have to look for the stuff. Hence the delay."

"Nowadays, everything is available in 'black' everywhere—any time."

"What if he doesn't get it?"

"Scepticism again?"

"Oh no. He is very resourceful in these things. He'll certainly manage some from somewhere."

"Yeah. He has surprised us on several occasions."

"He told he'd also confirm the expected news."

"Look, when the news is about to be telecast, what's the point in trying to confirm it?"

"I still have doubts."

"If you still talk of doubts, you'll see the worst of me. Inauspicious, that's what you are!"

"Look, don't utter abuses."

"Or else what'll you do?"

"You want to know?"

"Yeah, tell me."

"Hey you! have you really started to fight? Don't invite bad omens. We are about to receive the news we had been waiting for ages. And you are fighting with each other!"

"For how long have we been waiting for the news?"

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"From this afternoon."
"No. Since yesterday."
"No. For one year."
"Perhaps five years."
"No. Twenty years."
"Wrong. Forty years."
"A hundred years."
"Ten thousand years."
"Will you shut up? Human life is like bubbles on water. And you're talking of centuries and ages."
"No one knows for whom the bell tolls and when?"
"Who said that?"
"Me."
"You bugger! you should've become a saint or a godman. Pleading for escapism! Learn to face life."
"Facing it, as you see ... But for how long?"
"As long as life lasts."
"I'm talking about life only. We plan for a hundred years though not sure of a moment."
"Why didn't the news come yet?"
"I'm not at all confident."
"Of what?"
"That the news will come."
"By God, I'll kill you."
"Fighting again? Come on, shake hands."
"Eh! why shake hands?
"It's not good, fighting among yourselves."
"We are doing it in jest."
"No, *yaar*. Fighting, even in jest, is not good."
"Shut up! you, the son of Gandhi."
"Will you stifle the T.V.? This blasted *thumri* will never come to an end."
"Be on your guard. The news may come on the second channel."
"You're saying it with such confidence as though you've yourself put the seal of confirmation on it."
"Why don't you believe it after all?"
"Why do you believe it after all?"
"Have you seen God?"
"No."
"But you do believe in him?"
"This is between God and me. Why should I tell you?"

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"Why waste time talking rubbish? Come, let's play cards to kill time."

"Where are the cards?"

"Over there. Behind the books. Just pick them up."

"Just a minute. Count them first. Don't know whether all the cards are there."

"All the cards are there. But where is the joker?"

"We can play the game without the joker."

"We can. But there is no fun in playing when the joker is not there."

"Do one thing. Take any card for a joker."

"Which one?"

"Take number two."

"Bastard. You want to pick on the weakest and exploit it. This is unjust, sheer oppression."

"Then take number six."

"God forbid! What bad taste!"

"What's so bad about my taste?"

"A sixer for a joker! Adding insult to injury?"

"Make anyone then—number seven, eight or ten."

"Why not go for jack?"

"No. That's exploitation."

"The queen, then?"

"No. That'll be an insult to femininity."

"The king ...?"

"Yeah, we'll make the king a joker today."

"Then, who'll be the king?"

"Let the jack take his place."

"Ha! ha! what great fun we'll have!"

"What'll happen to the queen then?"

"What can happen to her? A woman always remains a queen—be she with the king or a commoner."

"That's right."

"What's right, you bastard! Just go to Fars Road and look at the condition of the queens there."

"You want to exhibit your knowledge of sociology or play cards?"

"Give away the cards. You've been shuffling them for ages."

"Here you are."

"What did you play?"

"What else but the king of spades."

"You forget, it's the joker now, not the king."

"Oh, Sorry *yaar*."

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"You don't remember a thing said to you a minute ago and think you're a smart one?"

"You save your queen ... Here's the king."

"You played the joker again. It's no more the king but the joker."

"God forbid!"

"*Yaar*, it's simply a question of social psychology."

"What is?"

"The question concerning the queen and the joker."

"What do you mean?"

"Having regarded it as the king for years, how do we take it as the joker in a jiffy?"

"That's right."

"Look at this fool now!"

"What's up?"

"Hey! do you realise what card you've played?"

"Jack—the jack of heart."

"Stupid. Under the new rules, it's the king, not jack."

"Gosh! I forgot it."

"What did you forget? You're incorrigible!"

"*Yaar,* in the new game, the queen remains intact. Her status should also be changed."

"Didn't I tell you—a woman remains a woman, whatever her status."

"I don't agree with you."

"Whenever women got a chance, they ..."

"But who gives women a chance? Men themselves!"

"Women are said to be men's weakness."

"You've again started the age-old debate."

"*Yaar,* now I really feel worried."

"About what?"

"This news. Don't know whether it'd come at all or not."

"Can you say with confidence that everything will be all right with the coming of the news?"

"Not only all right, everything will change."

"I still have doubts."

"What doubts?"

"That with the coming of the news, everything will change."

"*Yaar,* I see no fun in the game."

"Actually, we've made too many changes in the game."

"We've made jack the king and the king, the joker."

"Why does it happen that we get tired of changes very soon?"

"The reason, perhaps, is that ..."

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"Man did not like to stay even in heaven permanently."

"*Yaar*, you people always seem outdated."

"Forget it. Now tell me what else do we do if not play cards? How to pass time?"

"The bloody fifth one is getting too late. We could've drowned our boredom in wine."

"Where has this 'Timbakto' got lost?"

"Didn't I tell you he'll come back only after confirming the news?"

"But if the news were to come, it'd have come on the T.V. by now."

"*Yaar*, do you know the exact time it's supposed to come?"

"Exact time? No, I don't know the exact time. But it may come anytime during the night."

"Then wait and see. Don't be impatient."

"But, is it really true that everything will change when it comes?"

"All of you are inflicted with the serious disease of scepticism."

"O.K. Let's suppose the news has come. Then ...?"

"Then what? I've told you already that everything'll change."

"That's right. Tell me what kind of changes will take place?"

"How can I tell you exactly what changes will come about when I don't know myself?"

"You're a victim of confusion."

"Bastard! you've confused me."

"No. None has confused anyone else. All of us are equally confused."

"Perhaps our confusion will vanish when the news reaches us."

"You can't be too sure about this also."

"Then why are we waiting for this news?"

"Perhaps, it's another kind of self-deception."

"When shall we be free from this octopus of self-deception?"

"May I venture my opinion?"

"Has anyone sealed up your mouth?"

"What was your question?"

"When shall we get rid of this octopus of self-deception?

"I tell you ..."

"Just spit out what you want to. Creating suspense for nothing!"

"Come on, tell me again what you said."

"To hell with you. Bastard! Wasting time for nothing."

"Let me tell you. He said, when shall we get rid of this octopus of self-deception?"

"When we'll give up waiting for news."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing can change when people only sit and wait for news

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within the security of their four walls."

"What should we do then?"

"We should ourselves become news."

"We ourselves? ... how? Do you mean we ourselves ...?"

"Absolutely ... We ourselves."

"You sound quite dangerous."

"This points to bloodshed."

"I smell cartridges."

"I see only fire all around."

"You've made us panicky."

"What do you want then?"

"Actually we also want what you want. But we don't have the courage to do what we intend to do.

"Bastards! This philosophising has destroyed you. You never talk straight. You taint everything with philosophy."

"Forget it *yaar*. Neither the bloody news nor the stuff has arrived as yet."

"See! It has come ... has come."

"Aha! Our fifth comrade is here."

"Where have you been? Got dead-tired waiting for you."

"First tell us if you've brought the stuff."

"Yes ..."

"Hurrah!"

"And what about the news? Has it come?"

"Yeah, it has."

"Cheers! we've done it."

"The news has come. Then why do you look so depressed?"

"*Yaar,* the news indeed has come. But this is not the news we've been waiting for." □

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PORTRAIT

Sughra Mehdi

As he was watching the portrait his attention was irresistibly drawn to his own image reflected on the full-size mirror close to it.

He liked the portrait, but what about his own image? This, too, seemed lifeless, soulless like the other one ... Is there any affinity between the two? The same deep blue eyes—lost in thought. Anxiety and reflection had made deep furrows on the forehead.

"Look here. I want to get out of it." Startled, he looked about him, but there was no one.

"I want to get out of this frame, this prison-house of lines and colours. I want to breathe in fresh air and enjoy nature's enchanting beauty. I long to hear the chirping of birds, to see rivers flowing and to feel the touch of air on my skin. I want to see the sun-rise and the sun-down and to bathe in the cool moonlight. I've got scared of these eager and critical eyes. I've got fed up with the praise showered on me. The caption that adorns me is also wrong. I'm not what you see here. Please release me from this frame." This plaintive cry emanated from the portrait.

"You want me to release you? How can I when I am a captive myself?" He pointed out to his own image in the mirror. "These physical features are not mine, neither is this expression. I don't also like this colour. This has been imposed on me by the artist's brush against my will. There's nothing of me here, nothing at all that seems to be my own."

"Same here. There's no difference between you and me. Of course you know who put you in this frame and imposed this colour on you; I don't know who did this to me. I was not even aware of this. I was secure in the belief that I was free and independent and that all the colours in my portrait are my own. I thought these colours suited me well and their discreet arrangement made my personality greatly attractive. Now it appears to me that none of these colours is mine. They were imposed on me by different people at different times. When these people discovered these shades in me, I felt drawn

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to them, happy in the thought that I was loved and admired. I was thrilled and happy.

"Time moved on imperceptibly. Sometime I felt an ache in my heart—an unknown ache. I felt restless as a creeping doubt invaded me as to whether some particular shade was out of tune with my personality. Perhaps some other shade would have looked better. But then there was always somebody to reassure me that the shade was just right for me, that it was my very own shade and my doubt was drowned in a deluge of admiration and praise. But as time went on my doubt became a certainty that none of the colours in my portrait was mine. This feeling robbed my life of all repose. And I began to search for my own self in me. When people saw that the colours imposed by them had begun to fade, they got scared. They began to tell me that I had changed and that I was losing my identity. I felt nervous and found myself believing in what they said—that all the colours in me were mine and that they were of my own free choice. My mind went along with them but my heart refused to believe in what they said. My ears also remained unconvinced to the voice of my heart, habituated as they were to adulation and flattery."

"What happened, then?" the portrait asked, eager and restless.

"Well, the heart kept reminding me as follows: 'These colours are not yours; they've been dabbed on you. You've adorned yourself in colours liked by other people so that you can hear a few words of approbation and praise. This is not right. Wash up these colours and replace them with those of your own. But for this you've to be either absolutely black or white."

"Why didn't you do it?"

"I don't have the courage."

"Then—what'll you do now?"

"I've no idea. For the moment I'm at the crossroads. My old colours are fast fading away and I'm unable to decide on the new ones that'd be my own. Meanwhile my faded personality has become a veritable hell for me as well as for others."

"How strange! You're also not what you appear to be. One can never imagine from the glow of your eyes, your contented face, the smile on your lips and your confident steps that you are ..."

"Who'd imagine, looking at you, that you're unhappy with *your* colours and you consider yourself a prisoner in this frame? The colours, the features, the expression—none of these is yours. Who'd know that what you appear to be is simply the way your creator has made you—that your essential self is not there? No one would know because no one can hear you except me."

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Before the portrait could say anything a crowd of people came and pushed him away from that spot. He could not see the portrait now, but could hear its voice: "I want to get out of this frame and be free. Please get me out from here. These colours are not me." His image, too, was imprisoned in the full-size mirror though he was under the delusion that he had left it. He was moving away, watching the other paintings. He saw people walking about, listened to their voice. But in fact he was trapped in the mirror. And none of his colours was his own. □

Translated by M. Asaduddin



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AN EXTRACT FROM A NOVEL

THE DOMESTICS OF TEEN BATTI

Ali Imam Naqvi

THE Japanese Toyota negotiated the Teen Batti corner at lightning speed, startling all the domestics—the 'ramas'—sitting in hotels, shops and on the footpath. The thread of their conversation snapped for a moment. Then one rama praised the dexterity of the driver. In response, a second rama established his liaison with the driver's mother. A third one, when he heard the invective, asked :

"What would you do with the hag?"

"Then why the hell he was speeding like a whirlwind?"

"His sister must've eloped with some guy."

"Sister ..."

"Don't dream. No way you can get her."

"Bastard! Can't bear that one'd dream at least."

"What can you get, dreaming?"

"Yea, you'll ask. Because you've already got one. *Sala*, he vanishes at twelve everyday!"

"Yea."

"What yea? Having fun?"

"A little. But *yaar*, she's not a girl—a hazard."

"What did you say?"

"Did I say anything wrong?"

"Girls and hazards—they're same. No difference."

"He has no idea. A novice!"

"Yea, all you sister f...s have become experts!"

"Why not? Go ask Maria."

"Don't care a damn."

"Then believe me ... and admit it ... but don't worry, o.k.? We'll make you perfect ... But it'll take some time ... First you'll have to ..."

The senior rama left his sentence incomplete. He took out the tin of *surti* and poured some tobacco into his left palm. Then he fingered out some lime from a casket in the other pocket and mixed it with the tobacco. After kneading it for a long time he slapped the paste

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vigorously on his palm and finally pressed it between his lower lip and gum. Then he said: "Yea, as I was saying, first you'll massage *bai's* buttocks, then you'll pour some oil into her navel and massage it with your finger. Slowly she'll take the shape of Byculla flyover. Got it?"

"Idiot! Bastard!" the new rama muttered under his breath.

"Have you seen it? The Byculla flyover, towards J.J. Hospital? ... Then on the circle, one of her legs will stretch towards Bapurao Jagtap Marg ... and the other one towards the Palace Cinema Hall."

"*Arré*, the kid feels shy. Hey Dhundo, did you notice? How he went red? The hell he feels shy."

"Yea, he's a shy baby. His moustache's come out but he still feels shy. *Sala*."

"He's lying, I swear."

"No *yaar*, he's telling the truth."

"Tell me why the Sethani'll do it?"

"You'll know by and by ... there's no hurry. This is Teen Batti, baby ... Got it?"

★ ★ ★

There was a time when the Teen Batti locality used to be a quiet place. It was for this reason that the peace-loving members of the Parsi community built their houses in this area and its vicinity. But that is all past history. As in other parts of Bomaby, noise and commotion have become an inalienable feature of Teen Batti now. Morning or noon, afternoon or night—there is no respite from the unending din and bustle.

Though the regional transport office has declared the area a 'silent zone' Teen Batti remains agog with the blaring of lorry horns and the noise of buses lumbering along, puffing out thick, black smoke from their exhaust pipes. As evening approaches the commotion begins to subside ... At about nine, the sound of V.C.R. being played begins to be heard gradually rising to a crescendo. Grotesque figures appear on the curtains of beautiful halls inside the houses, holding telephone receivers close to their ears and scratching their armpits and thighs. Sometimes beautiful women take their place, hair cascading down their necks and thigh-hugging jeans highlighting the beauty of their legs. People walking on the Ridge Road stop in their tracks for a while to catch a glimpse of them. Some fun-loving young man whistles in excitement while some other recites a couplet or two at them. Time advances further. The doors meant for the use of

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servants come alive. The domestics working in nearby houses exchange their views. One question assumes utmost importance in their conversation and that is—"Is dinner over?" The question is always the same irrespective of the language used. Sometimes, however, the answer changes. Often there is the din and bustle of a birthday bash or some other party when the servants brag about the extravagance of their masters or their large-heartedness. By midnight the ayahs unroll their durrees on the floor and throw themselves on them. Boys and man-servants have their bath, smear themselves with talcum powder and lavender which they get as tips and slink away through the doors at the back. They go their different ways, but many of them hang about Teen Batti—outside shops, hotels etc.

The domestics in the Parsi families are mainly Christians or Gujaratis. *Bania* and *Marwari* families employ local Maharashtrian ayahs and boys. *'Bai'* is the term used for ayahs and 'rama' for boy-servants. The few British families in the area employ south-Indians as domestics. However, among all the ramas there is hardly anyone who does not frequent the parapets adjoining the houses in Teen Batti.

★ ★ ★

"Come on, tell me, did you understand anything?"

"I've come here to *work* ... This nonsense ..."

"Look kid, what I told you is also work."

"What kind of fucking work is it?"

"Yea baby ... This is *the* work, you understand? Buttocks, navel, then thighs ... then ..."

"Shut up, bastard! You just shut up!"

"Yea, you better shut up. The bottle's full. It'll flow over."

The following night brought a crisis of sorts for the ramas of Teen Batti. It centred round the new boy who was the butt of everyone's ridicule the previous night. He had received a telegram from home saying that his younger brother had fallen off a tree and was admitted to hospital. According to the boy, his employer had refused him leave of absence or any advance on his salary. This was the crisis which deeply preoccupied everybody.

The rama who boasted of his expertise the previous night spat out the tobacco juice accumulated inside his mouth and said:

"Not the fault of his master."

"You're siding with him, being a rama!"

"No, stupid. This boy joined only some days ago. No Seth'll grant leave in such a case."

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"At least he could give him some money in advance."

"Why?"

"The bastard is a *Marwari.* Lives on interest money."

"So what? You think he'll never fall ill?"

"Idiot! If he falls ill he'll shell out dough. He has tons of it."

"And ... he thinks this boy's brother is not a human being?"

"You're a real oaf! There's hell of a lot of difference between a human being and a *Marwari.* Got it?"

Then he turned towards the boy who looked quite distraught:

"Why you asked for leave?"

"To see my brother."

"What for? No use, I tell you. You'll finish the money coming and going ... Better do one thing. Stay here and keep on massaging Sethani's legs ... And send some money for your brother."

"But where's the money?"

"Will be managed. Just say how much ... What? Three hundred bucks. That's all? Oh hell! I thought you needed a thousand or so."

Then he called out everybody by name and when all turned towards him, said: "Brothers, our comrade's in trouble. We've to collect three hundred ... no, three hundred and twenty five rupees for him. Three hundred to send home and twenty five for money-order charges."

A mild chorus of 'no problem' greeted his proposal. The boy looked relieved. The *surti* tins were opened, *bidis* began to burn, someone took out a cigarette even. As one rama lit his *bidi,* Dhundo pounced on him :

"Fellow villager, where you got the lighter?"

"Got it as gift."

"Gift? From whom?"

"Seth's daughter."

"Seth's daughter—Anita Baby? Having fun with her?"

"No *yaar.* She got engaged. After the engagement she gave me this gift."

"Engaged—to whom?"

"A big goat he is."

"But she was very thick with Pradeep, no?"

"You're talking of Pradeep! She's emptied her bowels three times already."

"What a fucking life! In my village people fight and smash one another's head if a boy and a girl fall in love. If the girl gets pregnant, it leads to murder even."

Don't talk of the village, darling. Here's great fun. This is Bom-

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bay. Here you get *nirodh* easily. Go to the *bidi* shop, throw a quarter and have fun."

"But *they* don't use the quarter stuff."

"I know. I was talking of *us*. They use the imported stuff. Indian girl and foreign *nirodh*—oh, what a wonderful life!"

"Yea, very much!"

"So you'll get married here?"

"I'll see."

"Don't Sakku *bai* work for your Seth? Get her."

"Sakku? Don't talk of that bitch to me."

"Why? Why?"

"That bitch loved Pakia. And she got her bowel emptied some days ago. You know who got her pregnant? Her Seth! That bitch don't have her feet on earth nowadays. She wears sarees worth three hundred rupees and sneers at me and Pakia."

"These Seths're all bastards. They don't spare even the ayahs."

"You're right, *yaar*. Formerly ayah's used to be our property. If not us, our driver-brothers had fun with them. Now we simply wash the dishes. The drivers change gears. And the ayahs? They sit hugging the Seth on the back seat."

"Forget it. Talk of something else."

"Why forget it? Why?"

"Got dough in your pocket?"

"No"

"Then why the hell the ayah'll come to you?"

"O.K., let her not. Let her fuck around with the Seth. But the day I get the chance ..."

★ ★ ★

The next night all were there except for the rama who boasted that he was waiting for his chance. Everyone contributed to raise three hundred and twenty five rupees and the sum was handed over to the boy. He was greatly moved—smiling and crying at the same time. All the ramas looked at him intently. Some laughed at his simplicity while others thought how naive he was. Dhundo could not make out why he first laughed then cried. When he could not bear it anymore, he asked :

"Hey, first you laughed, then cried, why?"

"You tell me Dhundo *bhai*."

"How can I know? That's why I'm asking you."

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"I also don't know."

★ ★ ★

"*Ai sala,* where were you last night?"

"Last night?"

"Yea, last night. The kerchief was taken round for contribution. I told you day before yesterday, no?"

"Sorry, *yaar.*"

He took out two tenners and gave it to the boy. Then he said to Dhundo :

"I saw a movie yesterday. It's great fun."

"Fun? Did you get the chance then?"

"Yea. Yea."

"Great. Is Sakku ..."

"Sakku! *Sala,* you're taking her name again?"

"Baby and her friend."

"Baby—you mean Anita Baby? But you said she'e been engaged."

"So what *yaar*? They both played B.P. on the V.C.R."

"You also watched?"

"A little."

"Why not the whole movie?"

"*Arré,* the two wanted water to drink again and again. I had to fetch it."

"And the Oldies?"

"They'd gone to Lonawala."

"Sakku?"

"Yea, she also went with them. So I got the chance. See!" He took out two hundred rupee notes from his pocket and flashed them at Dhundo who licked his lips wistfully. Then he gave a start as though he remembered something :

"*Arré* Vinay, I almost forgot to tell you. Last night when we got up to return, your maternal uncle came. Your father has sent message that the marriage of our sister is to be fixed."

"Father ... sister ... you spoiled the fun."

"What do you mean?"

"To hell with them ... Just tell me if you could get the chance."

"Chance?"

"Yea. Come off it, quick."

"You don't understand? I mean, could you lay her?"

★ ★ ★

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"Vinay, oh Vinay"

"Shoot"

"Has Sakku come back?"

"Taking her name again? How many times I told you not to take that bitch's name before me?"

"You're calling her a bitch?" The new rama looked at him and asked, unconsciously. Vinay glared at him. Then he looked at the faces of all the ramas assembled. No one seemed to take any notice. The rama who asked about Sakku also seemed listless. Vinay looked at him again and asked in a somewhat harsh voice :

"Eh kid, how long you've been here?"

"Why Vinay *bhai*?"

"To hell with you *bhai*. Calls me *bhai* and makes fun of me!"

"Made fun of you? ... How?"

"Why're you losing your temper? He's just a kid."

"Kid? ... Don't tell me. Nowadays kids're giving a hell to their parents."

"You're getting shirty for nothing."

"For nothing?"

"Annu asked you a question ... but you began to harass that kid."

For a moment Vinay looked confused. He looked intently at Vinod for a while, then asked Annu :

"What's Sakku to you?"

"Nothing."

"Then why you asked about her?"

"I've got some work with her."

"Work?"

"Don't get upset. It's not what you're thinking."

"Then?"

"Could be some other work—any work. You're quizzing as though she's your wife!"

"Wife?" Vinay became sad. He looked sideways at Dhundo and then said to him slowly: "*Yaar,* you make my head spin round."

"Me! Look, I don't do anything. You're crazy and you've been so quite for sometime. You're dreaming of Sakku all the time. Day or night—you just wait for the chance and start babbling. Fact is, your brain's become hot inside ... But now on you're not going to get the chance everyday. And you're not going to have Sakku, ever. I tell you what, go to Fars Road. Shell out five bucks and you'll get any Sakku you want."

"Don't joke, *yaar.*"

"I'm not joking. Telling you the truth. You'll never have Sakku.

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Go there and take any damn slut for Sakku ..."

"No. If I go there I'll catch the disease."

"If you don't go there, then also you'll get sick."

"But tell me Dhundo—and tell me in the name of God—swear by your mother that you'll tell the truth—why that bitch doublecrossed me?"

"Doublecross! How she did it? She's clever, so you couldn't hook her."

"I wanted to hook her?"

"What else? Would you have married her? Tell me. Vinay, you can't understand Sakku. She's a deep one. She knows she can't be happy, marrying you. What can you give her, after all? A child every year, isn't it?"

"You're right."

"So you can see, anyone can give her children. But she doesn't want children only. She wants money—tons of it. She's hooked the Seth for his money. Now you got it?"

"Then why she made this show of love to Prakash?"

"By mistake. She must've realised later that there's not much difference between you and Prakash."

"O.K. ... but will the Seth keep her permanently?"

"That's her headache ... Why you worry?"

"She's a whore!"

"Vinay *bhai*", the new rama broke his silence.

"What's it now?"

"Why you abuse her?"

"Shut up, *sala*. His moustache's not black yet and he's showing interest in Sakku!"

"Please listen to me."

'Didn't I tell you to shut up?"

"But hear me out, brother."

"Don't bother me, o.k.? I told you to shut up, so stay quiet."

"Why're you getting shirty? He's just a kid."

"That's what I tell him. He's a big one to talk about Sakku!"

"Let him."

"What? Let him? ... This chit of a boy'll talk of Sakku? I ... " He became silent for a while, then turned to the new rama. He glared at him and asked in a loud voice :

"Hey you, what's it you want to talk about her?"

"I just asked what's the good calling her names?"

"Names? You're talking of calling her names? ... If I had my way, I'd have ..."

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"*Chi, chi,* what sort of people you are!" The new rama exclaimed as he got up from the parapet. Then he looked contemptuously, first at Vinay, then at Annu and finally at Dhundo, and said :

"Dhundo *bhai*, that day you all contributed money to help me. Today this *bhai's* calling Sakku names and you're all silent. Why? ... Tell me."

"What's that to you, baby?" Annu asked.

"Me? ... I felt as though he's abusing me."

"Why?" Annu asked again.

"Tell us why", Vinay joined in.

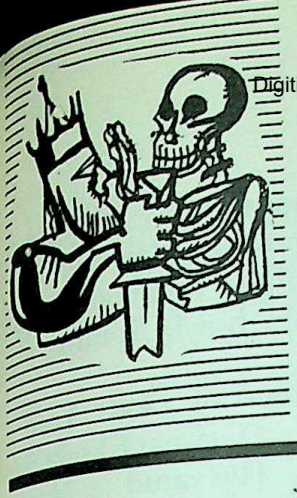
"Yes, tell us why you felt like this?" Dhundo also insisted.

"Why? ...", the rama could only mutter something under his breath. His tiny heart was welling up with conflicting emotions. And his little mind was trying in vain to find an answer to this simple question. He looked at everyone with moist eyes. All the ramas present there stared at him. The heat of their glare seemed almost to touch him and he shrank within. He wiped his eyes on his right and left shoulders by turns and moved towards the Ridge Road. The lamp post of Teen Batti splashed yellow light on the road and all the ramas continued to follow him with their eyes as he trudged on the weary road. □

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PLAY

A NIGHT ON PALI HILL

Qurratulain Hyder

(All characters are entirely fictitious and bear no resemblence to any person living or dead.)

Homai Junkwalla
Rodaba Junkwalla
Aunt Feroza
Dara Kazimzadeh
Gulchehr Isfandiari

Pali Hill, Bombay. An evening of July, 1976.

A seedy old drawing-cum-dining room. Window in the middle of the back wall. Carved Goan furniture. Chinese vases. A camphor box. A sofa, three chairs and a cottage piano near the window. Oval-shaped giltframed portrait of an old, distinguished-looking Parsi couple, above the sofa. Large photograph of a handsome, smiling young man, on top of the piano next to the model of a chinese junk. Right of the window a dining table laid for three, a couple of chairs.. Toby mug, curios, photographs of Queen Elizabeth II and the Shah and Shahbanu of Iran on a sideboard, a cuckoo clock above the window. Homai, a middle-aged woman, clad in black kimono is standing in the window, her back to the audience. Her younger sister Rodaba is playing "On Richmond Hill There Lived A Lass."

Homai : (harshly) Don't disturb me, Rudy. I am trying to pray. (Rodaba starts playing "I's The Last Rose of Summer Left Blooming Alone")

Homai : Rudy, its the night of the Full Moon and I would like to recite my Mah Yanaish ...

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There is going to be a downpour. How would poor Hoshang come? (Rodaba continues to play. Outside it starts raining. Flash of lightning. Somebody starts tapping the roof. Offstage cats howl. Sounds of a thunderstorm.

Homai : (loudly chanting the 101 Names of God) Yazd ... Harvasptwan ... Harvasp Agah ... Harvasp Khoda Afza ... Parwara ... Kharoshedtam ... Haryamd ... Harnek Farah ... Farmankan Afarmosh ... Afrazdam ... Adarbadgard ...

Rodaba : (begins playing "The Old Kentucky Home," tilts her head back and sings) *Weep no more my lady, O weep no more today, we shall sing one song of the old Kentucky Home, of the old Kentucky home far away ...*

Homai : (Blocking her ears with her fingers, recites in a louder monotone) Adarnamgar .. Badnamgar ... Badigulgar ... Aguman ... Azman ... Ferozegar ... Dadar ... Nayafid Khiradmand ... Dawar ...
(There is a loud knock on the door)

Rodaba : (Swings round on her stool) Somebody has come!
(The call bell rings)
(Homai goes to the door, opens it cautiously, peeps out, turns towards Rodaba)

Homai : Young foreigners!

Rodaba : Hippies?

Homai : No. They look like a high-class English couple. (Opens the door, a young man and a girl enter hesitatingly).

Young Man : (In an Oxford accent) Thank you, Ma'am. Most kind of you. (Helps the pretty blonde take off her raincoat. She is holding a parcel. They look like wealthy tourists.)

Girl : (In an American accent) Do excuse us for barging in like this. We have been trying to find Mrs. Kulsum Zariwalla's house. It seems impossible to locate it in such weather. Maybe you could tell us. It is supposed to be in this neighbourhood. (Shows a slip of paper to Homai who remains silent, peering at the newcomers in wonder, as if they have stepped out of a long-ago beautiful dream. Rodaba crosses over and smiles reassuringly, takes the address from the girl, puts on her glasses and reads)

Girl : The cabbie said this was Palimala Road.

Rodaba : No.

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Young Man : Ma'am, the taxi driver refused to go further in this rain. May we stay here till the storm passes?

Homai : (Suddenly as though waking up from her dream) Of course, of course, you are most welcome. Do come in and make yourself comfortable. I'll get you some hot tea.

(The handsome young pair look at each other with a slight hint of hesitation, come to the centre of the stage.)

Girl : Gee. Thanks (looks around) What a cosy living room!

Homai : American?

Girl : No, Ma'am.. Iranian.

Young Man : (Introducing themselves with enormous courtesy) Khanom Golchehr Isfandiari ... Dara Kazemzadeh.

Homai & Rodaba : Pleased to meet you.

(The pair sit down on the sofa. Golchehr's locket with a diamond studded 'Ya Ali' lights up as she faces the audience.

(Rodaba goes out briskly)

Homai : (sitting down on a chair) Coming from England?

Dara : Yes, Ma'am. Last night, from London. I am studying at Oxford. Golchehr is at Sarah Lawrence, in the United States.

Gulchehr : An Indian classmate of mine, Khadija Zariwalla, had given a letter and a packet to be delivered to her mother, Mrs. Kulsum Zariwalla, over here on Pali Hill. So we come looking for the house.

Dara : Miss Zariwalla had also given the phone number of her mother's house. We telephoned from Hotel Centaur, but the lines were out of order because of the rains. (Rodaba enters carrying the tea tray, places it on the centre table) Gulchehr and I have come to see India, during our vacation. (Noticing the keen interest on the old ladies' faces, he explains further) We are first cousins and also engaged to be married after we finish our studies. Before returning to the West, we'll go home to visit our parents.

Homai : Home?

Dara : Tehran ... Iran.

Homai : Oh, of course.

(Dara looks up and glances at the colour photograph of his King and Queen, Mohamed Raza Pahlar and

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Farah Pahleri, he is a bit surprised and pleased. Homai is very quiet. It seems as though she is entertaining guests after a very long time and does not quite know what to say to them.)

Rodaba : (more practical, pouring tea) Homai dear, have you introduced ourselves to our charming guests? Young man! I am Rodaba Junkwalla and this is my elder sister, Miss Homai Junkwalla. (Dara and his cousin nod and smile. Rodaba points at the portraits on the wall) and our parents—Sir Ardeshir Kaikaous and Lady Junkwalla. (Dara and Gulchehr look fascinated)

Rodaba : (pointing towards the photograph of the good-looking young man on the piano) and that is Hoshang Saroshyar Mirza ... Homai's fiance. (Homai blushes like a young girl and coyly bends down her head. Dara and Golchehr look surprised. Somebody begins tapping the roof again. The young pair wince and look at each other. Rodaba offers them cups of tea).

Dara : Thanks. How very nice of you.

Rodaba : Take a piece of cake. Homai baked it today. And I made the cottage cheese and scones.

Dara : Good Lord! Cottage cheese and scones! I feel as if I am still in England!!

Homai : (Dryly) Young man, when you go out of this house you'll realise how standards have fallen. I do hope you are able to find Mrs. Pochkhanawalla's bungalow, if it hasn't already been pulled down to make way for some monstrous skyscraper. You said Mrs. Pochkhanawalla lives on ...

Gulchehr : Mrs. Zariwalla.

Homai : Carter Road?

Gulchehr : No, Palimala Road. The cabbie took us all over the Hill. Somebody in the hotel had told us that the place would be somewhere near Dilip Kumar's house. Then on the way a guy directed us to Rajesh Khanna's bungalow. I said to the cabbie, "Dilip Kumar and Rajesh Khanna's houses seem to be famous landmarks over here," and he said, "No Madam, Meena Kumari used to live in 'Landmark'." (giggles). Anyway, we did come up to Rajesh Khanna's house, then got lost.

Homai : (Haughtily) And who is Rajesh Khanna?

Rodaba : Homai dear, Rajesh Khanna is an Indian cinema actor.

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So is Dilip Kumar.

Gulchehr : I have seen quite a few Indian movies in Tehran. My Mom saw *Sangam* thrice. She loved Vijayantimala and Raj Kapoor. Remember, Dara, when we were kids, Indian movies used to be so popular in Tehran? And I still remember those two songs *Dost dost na raha,* and *Meri jan shab bakher* ... (turns to Rodaba) Miss Junkwalla, do you know these songs?

Rodaba : (firmly) No. I do *not.*

Dara : (puts down his cup of tea, crosses over to the window, looks out and turns to Gulchehr). Gulchehr! It has stopped raining. Let's take leave of our kind hostesses. (The sisters look disappointed. He hesitates and looks around) Ma'am you have a lovely collection of Chinese curios!

Homai : (Her face lights up with sudden pride) My great-grandfather started trade with China. He had his own junks which sailed the China seas.

Dara : (Genuinely) Ah! *Slow Boat to China* and all that! How absolutely fascinating!!

Homai : (suddenly seems very keen to tell him all about herself). Before the Depression, most of the bungalows down this street belonged to our family. After the Crash they were all sold off. Our trade with China also came to an end.

Dara : Where are your parents?

Homai : (Flatly) They are dead.

Dara : Brothers?

Homai : (in the same monotone) They are also dead.

Dara : Any close relatives?

Homai : They are dead, too.

Dara : Oh, I'm sorry.

Homai : It is all right. What can you do about it.
(tap ... tap .... tap ... on the roof)

Gulchehr : (finishes her tea and looks at her cousin) Dara ...

Rodaba : (Quickly) No—No. Don't go away so soon. Have dinner with us.

Dara : Thank you, Ma'am. But its getting very late, and the taxi is waiting outside.

Rodaba : Send it away. Hoshang is about to arrive. He will take you to your hotel. Santa Cruz is not very far from here.

Homai : (startled) We have a 1938 model Packard. I used to

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drive it myself. Poona for the week-ends. Mahableshwar and Matheran during the summers. Can't drive now because of my arthiritis. The motor car has been lying in the garage for the last 15 years. But let Hoshang come. I'll ask him to take you to your hotel in our Packard.

Dara : (quickly) No—You mustn't bother. We'll go back in our cab.

Homai : (resignedly) All right. As you wish. My Hoshang also never wants to drive my poor old Packard. Comes and goes in a taxi.

Gulchehr : (suddenly in a bored voice) When will Mr. Hoshang come? (The bird comes out of the cuckoo clock and whistles)

Rodaba : He'll be here any moment. He is a bridge fiend. Goes every evening to the Willingdon Club. Comes here around 9.30 or so. How long are you going to be in Bombay? We'll ask Hoshang to take you to the club one evening. Even today in this city taken over by upstarts the Willingdon Club retains its old elegance and British atmosphere.

Dara : (politely) How interesting!

Gulchehr : Sounds like the country clubs of New England!

Homai : You are so right! I visited America with my parents before the Depression. New York, Boston, Philadelphia, the Niagara Falls, every thing. We even met Rudolph Valentino in Hollywood. He gave us his autographed photograph. I still have it somewhere. (Enthusiastically) Shall I show it to you? (stands up)

Rodaba : (peeved) Where will you hunt for it now. Forget about it.

Homai : (Obediently) All right. (sits down again, addressing Dara) Rodaba and I went to a finishing school in Switzerland. My Hoshang went to Cambridge ... like you ...

Dara : (Offended) I am at Oxford.

Homai : (indifferently) Never mind. Now I must go to the kitchen. Excuse me. (Gets up and goes out of the door followed by Rodaba. Outside, the rain begins falling again. Roar of the sea. Flash of lightening. Dara returns to the window and looks out)

Dara : (slowly) My God! It's pitch dark outside. I have never seen such a dark night before. Night of the Indian

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Monsoons! The sea and the clouds and the night have all become one ... (Gulchehr is growing frightened. She crosses over to Dara and stands close to him. He puts his arm around her protectively.)

Gulchehr : Dara ...

Dara : (Peeping out) Good Lord. Our taxi has vanished!

Gulchehr : (Leans out of the window) No, honey, it is right there, in the portico. But its so dark. Not a single light downstairs. This dilapidated mansion must have been quite imposing once. How strange—I have seen identical neo-Georgian houses on the cotton plantations in the Deep South.

Dara : (sadly) Our hostesses are busy getting dinner for us.

Gulchehr : Delightful old ladies. Look like a pair of woodpeckers. Poor things.

Dara : (Sadly) Gulchehr. Never make fun of old age. Some day you and I shall also grow old. If we continue to live ...

Gulchehr : (ashamed) I am sorry, Dara.

Dara : (slowly, in a thoughtful voice) Races grow old like individuals. An Indian Parsi friend of mine at Oxford told me that the entire population of the Parsis in the whole world was less than the circulation of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* ...!

Gulchehr : Good God!

Dara : Remember, when we were coming down Malabar Hill today, the taxi driver pointed towards a wooden enclosure, and said that it was the famous Tower of Silence. And then it occured to me—Pasardgard Persipolis, Ctesiphon. And in the end this! Lord, what an anti-climax.

Gulchehr : (ruefully) Yes, it is very sad.

Dara : (in the same thoughtful voice) No. We need not feel sorry. We are still there. And these remarkable people, who created our ancient civilization, shall also survive. Don't forget that they gave the world the concept of good and evil.

(The rain lets up. The window is lighted by a soft, milky white, rainwashed moonlight. Gradually, the light grows brighter)

Dara : Look Gulchehr. The Full Moon coming out of the dark clouds looks so magical, like a Constable landscape!

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Once this place must have been beautiful.

Gulchehr : The cabbie was telling us that only a decade ago Pali Hill was dotted with picturesque bungalows. Most of them have been pulled down and replaced by apartment blocks. (After a pause) Dara, I haven't come all the way from the States to see the so-called skyscrapers of Bombay!

Dara : Gulchehr, we are leaving tomorrow for Jaipur, Agra, Delhi, Khajuraho—the works. We are sure to find real India somewhere. Don't get bored so soon. (It starts raining again. Enter Homai and Rodaba carrying trays full of covered dishes. They place the trays on the dinning table and come back to their chairs. Dara and Gulchehr return to the sofa. Homai is very quiet, intently looking at her hands.)

Dara : (with genuine feeling) Ma'am, both of you have such lovely, aristocratic hands ... small and delicate—only meant for playing the piano and doing petit point embroidery. (The sisters look at him with grateful eyes).

Homai : (almost tearfully). My dear young man. You are very kind. Very civilized—But our butler, housemaids, cook, left us long ago. For years we have been cooking and cleaning ourselves.

Dara : (with sincerity) You shouldn't have bothered about dinner for us. We could easily go back and eat at our hotel.

Homai : I shan't hear of it. Hoshang is about to come and we shall all dine together.

Dara : Very well. Thanks. (Gets up again and strolls around looking at the cracked Ming vases. Then he stops before the portraits, in oil, of Sir Ardeshir and Lady Junkwalla).

Homai : (proudly) Our parents (wipes her eyes).

Dara : (softly) Yes. You told us (sits down).

Homai : (in a flat, hoarse, matter-of-fact voice) In the year 1934 when Papa went bankrupt, on a dark monsoon night like this, in this very room he wrapped a towel round his head and shot himself through his right temple.

Gulchehr : (shudders and moves closer to Dara)

Rodaba : Mama could not survive the grief and passed on after a few months. We were inconsolable. Our family *dastur* told us, do not cry. According to the *Howdakht Naskh*, God and His Prophet say that it is a sin to weep for the

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departed. Nobody, neither Balarawaneh Kaikaous who tried to fly to the Heavens, nor Afrsiab, Shah of Turan, who tried to hide from death in an iron palace beneath the sea, could escape extinction. When our parents passed on, all the sacred rites were duly performed and their mortal frames placed in the Tower. For three nights a lamp burnt in our house. Do you know, if the Holy Avesta is not recited for the first three nights, the Angel Sarosh does not help the soul in the first stages of its journey Onward. The first three nights are hard for the dead and seem like nine thousand nights. Drove after drove of demons try to frighten the soul in the Other World. But Sarosh helps a good soul across the Bridge. It is greeted by the Holy Ohes and the angels and welcomed into Paradise—I am sure our Mama and Papa are in Paradise, (wipes her tears).

Dara : (gravely) I am sure, Ma'am. (Upstairs the tapping begins again. The Iranians are scared and look up).

Dara : (clearing his throat) Ma'am. Do you have tenants upstairs? (The sisters look at each other anxiously).

Homai : (to Rodaba) Shall I tell them? (off-stage somebody is coming downstairs. An ancient Parsi lady enters through the right wing. She appears like an apparition—A high-necked blouse of white lace, white sari of china silk, worn in Parsi style, with a black beribboned velvet border, diamond brooch, diamond ear-rings. Rope of pearls round her throat. Gloves of white net, court shoes. It seems as though she is dressed for the Buckingham Palace garden party. Age about 95.

The Ancient Lady : (in a rasping voice) Homai, Rodaba—the Angel Sarosh helps nobody. Nor does Behram Yazd—nor Ahura Mazda Himself. Don't you delude yourself. Do you hear? All is Barzakh or Hell. There is no Paradise. Got it? I have come down at midnight to inform you that he has reached the Bridge and has faced Mehr Davar, and now my case is about to be presented before Mehr Yazd. 'Bye'. (She crosses the stage and goes out. Gulchehr clings to Dara in her fright. Rodaba and Homai are aghast. The clip-clop of the old lady going upstairs offstage. Silence)

Rodaba : (recovers from the shock) I'm sorry. This was our crazy

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aunt Feroza, former Lady Diamondcutter. She lives on the first floor. All by herself. She is 95 and batty, but look at her health and energy! Most of the time she keeps tapping the wooden floor of her bed-room with the point of her parasol, in order to annoy us. (Dara and Gulchehr hold their hands tight.)

Homai : (noticing their uneasiness) I think before Hoshang arrives I may as well tell you the story of poor Aunt Feroza.

Rodaba : (Sternly) No. Homai, keep quiet.

Homai : No. I must tell them. (The young couple stand up and move towards the exit. Homai grabs Dara's arm with extraordinary strength and pushes the boy and the girl towards the window.) Do you see that burnt down mansion in front—?

Dara : (stammers) Yes ... Yes ...

Homai : This was Lady Feroza's house. (Out of sheer habit Dara utters "How interesting," but checks himself.) Aunt Feroza was a distant cousin of our mother. Only daughter of wealthy parents. In the year nineteen-O-five when she returned from her Swiss school, she was married to Sir Faridoon-jee Diamondcutter. He exported diamonds to Belgium.

Rodaba : After twenty-five years of their barren marriage he died. Lady Diamondcutter became a millionaress widow.

Homai : Hoshang Saroshyar Mirza was my childhood friend. His parents were ordinary people. His father was a bank clerk. How could he ever hope to marry the daughter of Sir Ardeshir Junkwalla? He received a scholarship from our educational trust and proceeded to England for higher studies, so that on his return, he could become somebody and be able to propose to me. In the meantime we were ruined because of the Depression. My parents died. We became poor. In the year 1938 Hoshang come back from England, but he was unlucky as he had failed to secure a degree from the university of Cambridge. He could not get the kind of job he wanted. For three years he remained unemployed.

Homai : Then, one evening he said to me, standing right here by this window, "Homai dear, allow me to marry Lady

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Diamondcutter. She is old and ailing. Won't last long. She will conk out in a few years and we will get married. Both of us are facing hardships. This is the easiest way to solve our financial problem." I could not believe my ears, I was dumbfounded. He didn't wait for my answer, went out, crossed the lawn and entered Aunt Feroza's bungalow.

Rodaba : They were married in the firetemple. The wedding reception was held at the Turf Club. He became our Uncle Hoshang. Aunt Feroza couldn't believe her luck. In her old age she had married such a handsome young man.

Homai : Banam-i-Yazd—Now both Hoshang and I started waiting for her to pop off. At the time of her wedding she was sixty-plus. And Gulchehr—! At that time I must have been your age! And Dara—! Hoshang was very much like you! (The young couple shudder and clasp each others' hands again.)

Rodaba : But Aunt Feroza went on living. Sixty-five, seventy, Eighty. And poor Hoshang was like her A.D.C. Aunt Feroza had ordered him not to meet us even on the quiet, or else she would leave all her wealth to some charity. She had engaged private detectives to spy on us.

Homai : So now Hoshang became desperate. He began blowing up her money. Race course. Cards. Drinks. Stock Market. She kept on giving him cheque after cheque of enormous amounts, to keep him happy.

Rodaba : By the time Aunt Feroza was eighty, Hoshang had made her almost bankrupt. He celebrated her 81st birthday with great fanfare. There were 18 candles on the eighteen tiered cake. The best dance-band of Bombay played for the guests. We two watched the scene from this window.

Rodaba : Suddenly, we saw flames leaping up right in front of us. There was panic and tumult—! Somebody came running to tell us that while Hoshang was lighting the candles, a curtain caught fire. I was sure Hoshang started the fire himself, he was so fed up. The fire-engines arrived. The wooden bungalow was burnt to cinders. Aunt Feroza survived even now. All the guests ran out.

Homai : Hoshang also saved himself. He ran away and disap-

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peared. Some gate-crasher's corpse was found in the dining room entangled in the curtains. His face was half-burnt. The poor wretch resembled Hoshang. In her crazed state of mind Aunt Feroza thought it was Hoshang.

Homai : She immediately sent for an artist from the J.J. School and got his death-mask made. Then she had the last rites performed of the stranger. The press reported the news of the tragic death of Mr. Hoshang Saroshyar Mirza, who had not been able to escape from the inferno.

Rodaba : (raises her forefinger and says conspiratorially) But only we know the truth. The news was false. The world was mistaken. Aunt Feroza was mistaken. She still thinks that Hoshang died that night.

Homai : Her manor had turned to ashes. We two sisters were her only surviving relatives. After marrying Hoshang she had, for the last twenty years, stopped meeting us, but this was a catastrophe. We dutifully went across to offer our condolences. She was sitting on a chair under the laburnum tree, surrounded by some of her half-burnt expensive belongings. The death mask was in her lap. At that moment she looked like the terrible Goddess of Fate.

Rodaba : However, we had the last laugh. We requested her to shift to our house. She was known for her arrogance and imperious manners. She stared at us with anger and disdain. Then she pointed towards the death mask and said in her regal tone—'Homai, Rodaba! This luckless man tried to get rid of me by starting the fire. He had thought that he would run away and I would die. While the guests were singing 'Happy Birthday' he vanished behind the crowd. I noticed him sneaking away with a couple of lighted candles. I followed him. He began setting fire to the curtains. I tried to stop him but before he could escape the burning curtains fell over him and the flames enveloped him.

Anyway, even now he hasn't been able to achieve his deliverance. His soul has left behind its imprint on this—' She raised the death mask like a trophy and put it back in her lap. She shifted to our rooms upstairs as our tenant. Still she does not meet us. Every month she

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slips the envelop of the rent in our letter box—

Homai : After some time the death mask was stolen from her bedroom. She had gone to the firetemple. On her return she found that it was missing. After the disappearance of the mask she has completely gone bonkers. (Laughs aloud) Dara! My Hoshang is very clever. He lives in Colaba in disguise. He spends his evenings at the Willingdon Club. On Saturday nights he sneaks in here to have dinner with us, and goes back to Colaba. (The cuckoo clock strikes nine).

Homai : There! He has come. (Goes backstage. Rodaba sits down on the stool and begins playing "The Wedding March". After a few minutes Homai enters pushing a wheelchair. A figure made of wax, dressed in a black dinner suit is sitting erect in the wheel-chair. The death mask of the late Hoshang Saroshyar Mirza has been fitted to the neck of the wax dummy. The ironic, dying smile of the departed is horribly petrified in plaster of paris.)

Dara and Gulchehr Scream "Ya Ali!" and rush out. (After a few moments the taxi starts and drives away, offstage. Rodaba is busy playing the 'Wedding March.' Homai ties a napkin round the dummy's neck and places the wheelchair beside the dinning table. Then she lights the candles on the dining table. Next, she switches off the electric lights.)

Homai : (her back towards the sofa and the piano, placing a dish before the dummy) Dara—Gulchehr—dinner is served, candlelight dinner—ever so romantic!

(Rodaba begins playing the 'Fairy Waltz'. Homai is busy hovering over the dummy. Rodaba switches over to the 'Moonlight Sonata.' Then she abruptly gets up, comes towards the dining table. The sisters sit down opposite each other. The Waxen Hoshang is in the middle. In the candle light the three shadows look eerie on the wall. The sisters bend down their heads and whisper the Zorastrian Grace. Ahur Mazda—who has created the cow and the corn and trees and water—May the angels Khordad and Amardad bless us with each morsel. May this food be like honey and grant us wisdom. May Evil and Sins be destroyed a thousand times. (Actual prayer in the Avestan language may be recited here.

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Homai raises her head and turns towards the sofa.)

Homai : Dara—Gulchehr come along, dear. Dinner is ready ... Good God—where are they? They have gone away ...

Rodaba : Gone away? (pause) Now I am wondering. *Who on earth were those two?*

Homai : Never mind, Rudy. They must be mad. We asked them to stay for dinner and they ran away in such foul weather. Crazy foreigners ...

Rodaba : Yes, dear. There is no dearth of batty people in the world. One has to be very careful these days. All manner of loonies can turn up to waste our time ... (suddenly laughs a horrible laugh)—vanished suddenly ... were they ghosts ...?

Homai : Crazy foreigners ... loonies, Hoshang dear, have the clear soup first (takes out a spoonful of soup, carries it to the death-mask's lips. The death-mask, with its terrible smile, gets tilted over the plate. Outside, rain and thunderstorm. Flash of lightning. Cats howl. A gust of wind enters the window, and candles flicker and blow out. The stage plunges into semi-darkness. In the half-lights, Homai and Rodaba are seen putting soup to the lips of the death mask as the curtain slowly falls). □

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KATHAN DAGARIYA : A REREADING

Gopi Chand Narang

SOME of Balwant Singh's stories skim the surface of sexual monotony leading to boredom and dullness in life, but *Kathan Dagariya* is different. It delves deep into the libidinous drive and reveals several layers of meaning. Apparently it may seem that the man is the active agent and the woman is the passive receiver. The listless and uniform routine of everyday life which dulls a man's emotion is not only man's problem, but the problem of the woman, too. The phallocentric culture of course regards man as the only active agent while, in fact, woman is an equal partner. It is not necessary that Balwant Singh wrote the story with woman being the pivot. He just constructed a lively narrative through his artistic imagination. However, as a basic question has been touched, either through design or otherwise, *Kathan Dagariya*, is the kind of story that may lend itself to deeper readings. In my opinion it can subvert the expectation of the reader and go against conventional meaning. It is a story of unpleasant truth, not of romance, idealised or otherwise.

Like *Granthi* or *Soorma Singh, Kathan Dagariya* is also a very well-constructed story where there is not a single word that is superfluous and the narration flows with extraordinary fluency. Rikhi Ram is a middle-aged businessman, a father of three children. His wife, Shanta is still beautiful but does not have the charm of the former years. Baij Nath is Rikhi Ram's friend whom he had helped in finding a house. Gradually Rikhi Ram is drawn towards Kamini, Baij Nath's wife. The two families are on close terms and they visit each other frequently. One day Rikhi Ram has to go out on business. He rings up his wife and asks her to pack up his things as he has to leave for Delhi by the night train. In the meanwhile he receives a message from Delhi to the effect that the person he wants to meet in Delhi is coming to Lahore. On reaching home Rikhi Ram tells his wife that

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the journey has been postponed but he will have his dinner outside. He takes his bath hastily, gets ready and leaves home. He was an admirer of Abdullah brand cigarette which he must smoke in moments of happiness or excitement. Scheming in his mind, he heads for Baij Nath's place, but there he finds that Baij Nath has plans to go out. Rikhi Ram tells that he was passing this way and thought of looking him up. If Baij Nath is going out, he will come some other time. But Baij Nath implores him to stay on and promises to return in an hour or so after attending an invitation. He further asks Rikhi Ram to have his dinner right here so that they may have a game of cards on his return. Balwant Singh portrays the scene deftly after his departure as follows :

> Closing the vestibule door, Kamini came and stood by the drawing room window watching her husband going. He waved back to her as their eyes met.
>
> Standing still she looked down the lane at her husband's receding figure. Rikhi came up and stood by the wall, close to her. For sometime Kamini kept looking at the deserted lane and then her hand went up to the electric switch. The next instant the light was off. The moonlight filtering through the window spread over the *durrie* on the floor.
>
> Rikhi stretched out his hand. Going over her back it came to rest upon her waist. Her body trembled a little. He came closer to her. Their eyes met. Her waist shook and then became still which was its own answer to the question.
>
> They were standing silent. Kamini!" Rikhi said in a faint tremulous voice, saturated with emotion.
>
> In reply Kamini raised her eyebrows and once again gazed at him and then in a spirit of self-surrender lowered them. He advanced like lightning and throwing his arms around her waist pulled her to himself. He felt as if he had twisted the tender bough of a flower plant. His body from head to foot was enjoying the feel of Kamini's tender body. Overwhelmed by a strange impulse he pressed her body hard, hugged her and kissed her. It was her child calling again. The voice fell like hammer strokes on his ears. She disappeared from before his eyes like floating fragrance, leaving him standing there all alone.
>
> Kamini was sitting by the *chulha* and was stirring the spoon in the pan. Her three years old son was dozing as he squat on the floor. Kamini's face glittered in the light of the embers. Her locks had got a little unruly. After putting the child to sleep, she starts to prepare *chapatis* for Rikhi Ram :
>
> Turning the *chapati* on the iron pan, Kamini said, "You must be feeling hungry."
>
> Getting up he put his lips on her cheek. "No, Kammo, I'm not hungry." He tried to hold her in between his arms.
>
> Surrendering herself to him, Kamini said, "But first let me prepare the *chapati*.."
>
> "No, Kammo ... no, you are dearer to me than life. The *chapatis* can

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wait." With a jerk he pushed away the pan from the *chulha*.

At this point it was possible for any other story writer to draw towards obvious openness or obscenity. But Balwant Singh restraints himself at the right moment and leaves everything to the imagination of reader. He just says this :

He lay on the *durrie* in the drawing room, his legs resting on a chair. He was happy like one intoxicated. In the bright electric light he was idly turning the pages of *The Weekly* which was resting on his stomach.

Sitting in front of the *chulha* Kamini was preparing *parathas*. The bygone days in comparison with this evening appeared to be colourless and pedestrian to him. He had never felt so happy before —contented and light at heart and his soul so full of bliss ... Today he and Kamini had become one in heart and body.

The climactic moment of the story comes when the contended Rikhi Ram, on his way back home, asks the *paan*-seller at the bend as a matter of habit whether anyone came to visit him. The *paan*-seller says: "Babu Baij Nath came, waited for you for sometime, then left." "Baij Nath?" "Yes, Baij Nath Babu." He begins to ponder and trudges home slowly. As he enters the house Shanta looks prim and fresh. As he sits on the sofa, he says: "Shannu, you look very happy today." Without saying anything she quietly places her cheeks on his shoulder. Shannu's eyes are heavy with sleep and her eyelashes droop downwards. He says: "I'm also very happy, Shannu; would you get my packet of Abdullah Cigarettes, please.

There is not a single strand loose anywhere in the story. The events are encapsulated in a single evening when nothing happens unexpectedly or by accident. Besides being a true portrayal of human nature, the author has dealt his strokes with such mastery that nothing sticks out. Everything happens in its natural way. The events happen as though in a pleasant dream—Rikhi Ram's plan as he returns home after day long work, his visit to Baij Nath's place with a tremulous desire, Baij Nath's going out on the pretext of invitation, the coming on a platter of the opportunity Rikhi Ram has been looking for so long, the glitter and melting away of Kamini's body as she sat by the *chulha* all these seem like objective correlatives of 'Rati' and 'Kaam' and a metaphor for sexual consummation. The master stroke of irony comes at the end when Rikhi Ram realizes that he is not only the hunter but the quarry as well.

Apparently, the author has woven a simple narrative where the technique of dual strategy has been adopted. That is—who wants to dupe becomes the dupe himself. The psychology of middle aged couples, sexual boredom or extra-marital gratification—all these are the externals of the story which have no extraordinary aspect to them. The element of curiosity in the story derives from the sexual urges and the insistence on the fact that one pair of man and woman do

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not know about the design and understanding of the other pair though they are involved in the same act. Infidelity and deception are a part of human nature but the spectacle of the duper getting duped, certainly evokes an element of surprise. However, this is not exactly a story about the law of retribution. It is true that Rikhi is shocked after his talk with the *paan*-seller and for some moments he could not move. But this sense of defeat and loss is temporary. As he reached home he tells his wife, "You look very happy today" and adds a little later, "I'm also very happy. Please get me the packet of Abdullah cigarettes." As though the defeat, in fact, is no defeat. To read the story simply as a narrative of extra-marital sex, or exemplifying the notion of morality versus immorality would amount to doing injustice and killing the artistic beauty of the story.

The narrative text lends itself to other readings as well. The other side of the significance, which in fact was hidden, is illuminated after Rikhi's exchange with the *paan*-seller. Or one may say that a single event splits and manifests itself as two, or a single phenomenon becomes double-edged and two similar phenomena that replicate each other come into existence. The absent narrator of the story is with Rikhi Ram i.e., the event in which Rikhi Ram and Kamini participate is on focus because they are the two 'present' elements. The same event also takes place between Baij Nath and Shanta simultaneously who are the two 'absent' elements and the reader comes to know of it later. These dual events of the four elements cancel as well as affirm each other. The two of them do not know about the other two and the reader also does not know about the other two though all the four are simultaneously active. The point to be considered is whether in the course of the monotony and routine meaninglessness, the unexpected juxtaposition of 'elements' does not become the harbinger of new joy, hence new significance? Mir, the greatest of Urdu Ghazal poets says :

> The universe is all a play of elements
> Behold the wonders the four can work.

The story of course says what it says, but it also says what it does not say. The implications of the text for the play of signification in art or literature, which always strive for the unexpected or the innovative for creating aesthetic pleasure, are quite interesting. The sexual relation of man and woman, in several ways, is an allegory of the arts. The reverse is also true, i.e., the arts are the allegory of the man-woman sexual encounter. In arts the ecstasy is told and retold

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for centuries on end. The most serious challenge comes when the artist or the writer wants to escape from the heckneyed and the cliche. While it is important to keep one's relation with the past, it is equally important to deviate from the worn-out or to rebel against routine and humdrum. The stale, the heckneyed or the routine is the greatest enemy of creation. The artist, the poet or the writer always endeavours for the new. The basic mystry of art is in the perpetual yearning for the innovative, be it style, diction, expression, idiom, voice, point of view, anything that is different, dissimilar, novel, or makes a departure. The quest is in avoiding the chilling effect of the dreary dullness and uniformity while at the same time striving for freshness and newness.

The Russian Formalists had pondered deeply over this problem. The observation by Shklovsky that objects lose their vitality and freshness in everyday life is quite apt. In the course of time everything becomes ordinary and routine. The movement of art and literature always is towards the restoration of the freshness. One may refer to Shklovsky here :

> "Habitualization devours objects, clothes, furniture, even one's wife ... All art exists to help us recover the sensation of life; it exists to make us feel things."

Familiarity is the enemy of art. Sameness creates monotony and dulls the senses that become insensitive to freshness and vitality. Why do great artists always quest for individuality and poke fun at the trite and the commonplace and want to escape from cliche? Whv is freshness or novelty in art, be it in theme or style, always associated with nonconformism and revolt. The Russian Formalists referred to this process as 'defamiliarisation'. In other words, in art and literature, the real play that casts the spell is somehow linked to the unfamiliar and the innovative.

Talking of *Kathan Dagariya,* Rikhi Ram and Baij Nath leave their houses and go in their different directions, but Kamini and Shanta do not leave their place. Rikhi Ram and Baij Nath are in motion and Kamini and Shanta remain established where they are. Here man is in flux, the seeker of pleasure; woman the source or giver of pleasure is stable quite like the 'signifier', which is constant, unvarying. The question is, isn't man the 'signified', always in motion, varying, unstable, perpetually in flux? Whereas on the other hand woman functions as signifier, the source of pleasure and bliss, with a capital S, which is, secure, firm, and does not change its place. Man as stated

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above acts as signified, infirm, constantly in motion. This is understandable in the light of ancient cultures or gynocentrism of the Indus Valley as well, or of the matriarchal epistemology of the Shakti myth, which is still prevalent in many of the hill regions and tribal cultures where the woman and not the man enjoys the central position in the family structure. Looked at from this angle, the story seems a forerunner of contemporary feminism though Balwant Singh may not have dreamt of it while preparing the text. But the text not only says what the author wants it to say; it can go beyond the writer and reveal other meanings with subsequent readings. This much is obvious that there is a dual relationship between the signifier and the signified—one which is given, or determined; and the other which is free, open or non-determined. Kamini and Baij Nath are wife and husband and this relationship is the given and determined, while Kamini and Rikhi Ram are not wife, husband and their relationship is free and non-determined. The fixed meaning is mediated by custom and usage, as the fixed relationship between husband and wife is mediated through social and moral code. Obviously the determined is stale and limited and thus lacks newer possibilities. Nonetheless, when signifier establishes a new relationship with signified, then a whole lot of new signification is generated leading to (aesthetic) pleasure. As long as Kamini and Shanta are with their given signified, it is cliche; but as soon as they establish relationship with the free or non-determined signified, they acquire new meaning and the possibility of vitality and pleasure opens. It should be borne in mind that signifiers remain fixed and stay put, whereas the signifieds are in motion (Rikhi Ram or Baij Nath). This alludes to the fact that the meaning is in a state of flux. This lack of fixity or the opening up of signification is the harbinger of freshness and novelty. In sum, literature and art operates through freshness and thrive by creating newer realities and significances, and not by following the beaten track.

Furthermore, it will be interesting to note here that the aspect of novelty or newness that is there at the bottom of sexual pleasure, or in the genius of art and literature, is also the greatest enigma of the creation of the universe and evolution which is responsible for life's continuance and growth. That is, cells get continuously divided and create their replica where hundreds of thousands of DNA codes keep repeating themselves exactly in a given pattern. Nevertheless, it is the law of nature that among the thousands and millions of codes that merge in the divided cells, there may occur just one code which is different from the rest. This one code makes the pattern free and ensures evolution. The process is known as mutation. If there were

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not one free mutation among millions of patterns, then the infinite possibilities of species and races and features would not be conceivable at all. In other words, the variety and vitality of nature is gift of the free pattern. The same holds true for art and literature. Here also, novelty and freshness does not derive from predetermined meaning but from unconventioal sensibility or innovation or unusual and unexpected meaning. Well, Balwant Singh was least concerned with any of these. He had just created an interesting text. However, a genuinely creative text always carries the possibility of newer readings with the passage of time. Thus, there can be no denying the fact that *Kathan Dagariya* can be read as an allegory of the creative pleasure of unconventional relationship, or of the ever-going play of novelty and freshness in art and literature. Such a reading, as could be seen, is both interesting and meaningful. □

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THE QUESTION OF POETICS

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

[SHER-E-SHORANGEZ is a pioneering four volume study of Mir Taqi Mir, the great eighteenth century Urdu poet by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi. Faruqi's critical approach is eclectic, drawing from a large spectrum of critical concepts both from the East and the West. He adds a comprehensive preface to each volume, mapping out his critical framework and providing underpinnings for his judgements. The following is the translation of an excerpt from the preface to volume I of *Sher-E-Shorangez.*]

ONE may ask whether classical ghazal has any poetics or not. And if it has one, what is the need to get it into currency again. There is certainly a poetics of the classical ghazal (it is another matter if we have lost it or have been deprived of it). Had there been no poetics, there would be no poetry. And its reclamation is necessary inasmuch as no real evaluation of a work is possible as long as we are unaware of the poetics that makes it meaningful ... No one will disagree with the view that a work of art is the expression of a culture and we cannot understand any expressions of a culture if we are not aware of the values of that culture ...

The question may arise whether the Western poetics is not quite adequate to understand and assess our classical literature. The simple answer to this question is that the Western poetics will certainly be an aid to our work or one may go even further and assert that it is inevitable for us to make use of the Western poetics. But this poetics alone is not adequate for a proper appreciation of our literature. If we use only this poetics, we cannot do justice to our heritage of classical poetry ... And if we apply it indiscriminately, then the conclusions arrived at in the light of this poetics may turn out to be wrong, misleading and unjust.

If I had not been aware of the occidental views of literature, this book would not have been written. They have helped me understand the oriental views of literature and Eastern poetics and encouraged

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me to combine the Western and the Eastern poetics in a larger perspective for literary appreciation without any confusion. However, though like some of my predecessors I was influenced by Western thoughts, I did not allow myself to be swept away by them. And I gave precedence to the Eastern poetics over the Western. This does not mean that I consider Eastern poetics, always and at all places, to be better than Western poetics. However, to understand our classical literature, the principles of Eastern poetics will certainly be of greater help. In other words, to judge our own classical literature, I take recourse first to the Eastern poetics and do not apply the standards of the Western poetics. Of course, to analyse and elucidate the merits or demerits of literary works, I make an unabashed use of Western thoughts and concepts. In matters of principles, I agree to Western concepts to the point and in cases where the validity for such agreement is inherent or obvious in our poetic principles. For instance the 'making of meaning' has been discussed in formalism as well as in old Sanskrit and Arabic poetics. Both Anand Vardhan and Todorov agree that words behave in different ways. The view of contemporary critics that poetics, in fact, is the theory of reading is similar to the thoughts of the ancient Arabs that there are different ways of reading a text.

Further, Western theoreticians have pondered deeply over meaning (i.e., how words come to acquire meaning, and how multiple meanings may cohere). One finds commonality of views in Jurjani, Sakkaki, Anand Vardhan etc. I make use of the insights of our own thinkers first. Western thinkers have written a lot about metaphor. In our poetics, metaphor does not have the same centrality. In place of metaphor, our poetics (i.e., Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic poetics) gives primacy to the content. Thus, this book contains more discussion on the theme rather than metaphor. Again, the Westerners have written extensively on the ontology of a work of art; Easterners have done very little in this field. Here I have made use of the Western views. What can be the different ways of understanding poetry?—this question has been discussed extensively in the West. We have done pretty little in this field. Here also I did not have any qualms in taking recourse to Western poetics. Except Sanskrit poetics, all other Eastern poetics have an attitude of humility towards the poet (some ancient Arab theorists also exhibit this humility). In the West, many critical movements advocate an attitude of humility while approaching a work of art. This I have learnt from both. □

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SURVEY

THE CURRENT TRENDS IN URDU LITERATURE

Shafey Kidwai

NOTWITHSTANDING the immense and widespread adulation of the creative dexterity and aesthetic sensibility of some of its major exponents such as Mir Taqi Mir, Ghalib, Iqbal, Prem Chand, Manto, Bedi and Firaq, Urdu literature is largely, though erroneously, perceived as a body of highly impressionable and susceptible writings. Its most sought-after verse genre *ghazal*, barring some exceptions, primarily draws its sustenance from the maudlin as well as metaphysical notions of love. Cliché-ridden diction, hackneyed symbols, trite images and antiquated metaphors eloquently sum up its structure.

These arguments are not completely unfounded despite their tendentious mien in that Urdu literature has been found wanting in getting itself disentangled from the bond of tradition. Despite its close affinity with the tradition on subject matter level, the history of Urdu literature makes it clear that fiction writers have not infrequently embraced new literary movements and trends with open arms. Seldom have new trends left their imprint on *ghazal* but Urdu short story abounds in experiments in new—fangled style. Since its inception, Urdu short story has reflected its penchant for incorporating pre-eminent advances on both the levels, of form and content. The epoch-making writing of Prem Chand, Manto, Bedi and Qurratulain Hyder bear an eloquent testimony to this point. Prem Chand's intent on the mores of rural life gradually took Urdu fiction into the realm of realism. He astutely blended idealism and realism in his writings and with him Urdu fiction became a product of the soil. Prem Chand's creative genius and constant insistence on simple realist narrative also resulted in a quest for some streams through which inner reality and the complex interplay of the outer

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world might seek expression. Saadat Hasan Manto blazed a new trail in Urdu short story by making it a point to record almost every pulse of human existence which is downright despicable and nugatory. His world is not devoid of moral values but it is inching towards anarchy. Manto's characters are unpredictable and vividly reveal the abstruseness and intricacies of the human psyche. The coalescence of unpremeditated events intensifies dramatic fervour and psychological density. Far from treading on the path of realist and romantic writers, Manto endeavoured to repudiate the mannerism and feigned morality of both the upper and middle classes. His poignant style in geared towards inflicting a lethal blow on our pre-occupied notions of human behaviour. His penetrating irony has placed him at the acme of realism which is both manifold and variegated. Manto is primarily concerned with the common man who is an individual as well.

Another prominent fiction writer, Rajendra Singh Bedi, also reflected new trends in his writings. His subject matter is predominantly Indian and he responded aesthetically to some of the radical changes in the country. Bedi's pre-occupation with social realist narrative did not deter him from deviating from the traditional epistemological premises of cause and effect by bringing allegory, myths, archetypes, and metaphors into play judiciously. His short stories basically deal with the stark realities of life. His characters exude emotionally mixed reaction towards the present. Indian domestic life revolves around women who relentlessly toil for the betterment of the family but their ameliorative efforts hardly get recognized. The 'unsung heroine' whether a beloved, a sister, a wife or a mother fired the imagination of Bedi who candidly portrayed the traditional Indian woman. The portrayal of Indian womanhood prompted G.C. Narang, to conclude: "Bedi does not idealise women but the suffering, enduring and tolerating nature of his characters imparts to them a touch of sanctity, a breath of greatness. The woman in Bedi's stories, whether a beloved, wife or a mother is the suffering soul of creation, the all pervasive spirit, the mother of the whole universe"[1]. Bedi also indulged in radical experiment with language. His frequent use of pidgin language and discursive mode of narration not only reveals his lexical exuberance but also makes him the most outstanding contemporary fiction writer.

Besides the undeniable influence of Prem Chand, Manto and Bedi, Qurratulain Hyder opened new doors in Urdu fiction by discerningly applying the stream of consciousness and cinematic techniques of montage and flash back with a view to unsettling both

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the traditional mode of story telling and time sequence. The ambivalences of modern life somewhat impels her to seek refuge in the past which always infatuates her. Her writings centre round a putrescent culture with a deep melancholic sense of dislocation. In her epoch-making novel *Aag Ka Dariya* the cultural chronicle of the past is presented with imagistic preception. Qurratulain Hyder's primary concern with "things that are lost" resulted in seeking refuge in sceptic questioning of the existentialist tradition in her fiction. The past interspersed with a free-flow of cross-cultural streams enkindles her imagination and she constructs the social saga of the fading culture of the upper class Muslims of North India. Her themes, drawn from nostalgic and wistful experiences, betray her inability to break from tradition. The heart-rending and appalling but ineluctable disintegration of the noblesse provokes her to have a dig at the neo-rich class.

The new short story committed to modern sensibility and Kafkaesque tradition made its appearance in Urdu in the mid sixties. It owes much to Manto. Besides Qurratulain Hyder and Intizar Hussain (Pakistan), Surendra Prakash changed the course of modern short story. Surendra Prakash's stories manifest a definite deviation from the realist narrative. From the scrap of realist short stories, Surendra Prakash fashioned a self-referential narrative which is the hallmark of post-modern fiction. With his famous short stories such as "Aap Beti, Bijoka" and the like, "avant garde" writings in Urdu gained firm ground. Perhaps, he is the first Urdu writer who sought to create fiction upon fiction. Recreating some famous characters of Prem Chand and Krishan Chander, he not only opened up new horizons in Urdu short stories but also generated fiction upon fiction that Linda Huthcheon calls, "metafiction or fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its narrative and linguistic identity" [2]. Another prominent progressive short story writer Abid Suhail unlike his seniors, sprang up a recursive strategy of narrative embedding by providing an update on Prem Chand's famous story "Idgah." Of late, Abdullah Hussain whose novel *Udas Naslen* was a phenomenal success evolved a new strategy of story telling. Qazi Afzal Hussain points out in his recent paper, "What is post-modern in literature?" :

> Some texts in Urdu reveal that no dichotomy exists between natural/cultural or fact/fiction. The narrator of his latest novel *Qaid* says, "whatever happened after this, is a mysterious event." Nobody knows the nature of the event or its cause or causes, only its result makes itself abstruse and more mysterious than the original event. Here, first we read/witness a situation; then come across its causes. In other words first we witness a situation; then the story follows. On

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eleven occasions the author tells us "This is the story," "This is the situation", and the like. The narrator also asserts, "now reality is exposed," "Now the sense shifts to somewhere" etc. By reporting such phrases, the author makes it clear that he is telling a story. This is the innovative method of constructing the story because by employing this strategy Hussain not only incorporates causes/events into the story-structure but also diffuses the traditional difference between story and reality although in the first place, the author keeps them out from the story[3].

The structurally balanced characters make it clear that his craftsmanship is not natural but cultural. Hussain also suggests that the reality is what we comprehend through language. Abdullah Hussain also deploys ironic, parodic and comic modes of narration with a view to calling attention to the negative element inherent in sobriety and solemnity. According to Qazi Afzal the novel *Qaid* incontestably demonstrates that "reality itself is a story which we deliberately construct in order to fulfil our cultural needs."[4]

Certainly Abdullah Hussain's writings have the bearings of post modern self-referential fiction but Naiyer Masood has run the full gamut of it. In his writings the traditional narrative mode which owes much to commonsensical logic goes astray. Hatching an inconclusive non-discursive narrative paradigm in almost all his stories, he provides a model for making a free play of probabilities possible. Some of his stories remind one of Professor Suzet Henke's remark. "the post modern writer may offer us an apocryphal version of history ... "[5] Naiyer Masood in line with the post modern writers also offers an apocryphal version of history in his story "Sultan Muzaffar Ka Waqia Nawees." It not only presents an apocryphal version of history but also shows his penchant for creating fiction upon fiction. The narrator on several occasions says that he is assigned to record the construction of a tomb which he never saw.

Naiyer Masood's narrative model hardly betrays any conclusion and the following excerpts from his stories prove this point:

"I felt that I have solved the obscure riddle but I also felt that the solution is more vague than the riddle."[6]

"That house you remember"

"I don't remember"

"You do remember", he said in a convincing tone "that house you remember where everything was alien to you?"

"No."

"Yes, it was so. Don't compel me; otherwise I will start questioning. Everything was unknown and you were familiar with the unfamiliar things."

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"Yes, I was" I said.
"That's why you look back on it. The house where you were ignorant of everything. Bear in mind, O.K."
"All right" I said.
"Then where is the knowledge?"
"Knowledge?"[7]

"It is not good to be a stranger, helper."
Perhaps for the first time he uttered my name or possibly not.[8]

Close on the heels of some eminent post modern writers, Naiyer Masood also batters casual realist narrative by bringing paradoxes into play assiduously. He also makes use of functional prose which is completely unprovided with persuasion. Analysing one of his stories "Sultan Muzaffar Ka Waqia Nawees" Qazi Afzal describes it as "a good example of constructing story upon story".[9] Here the writer has been constructing the story not on his experience or observations, but he has been relying on the statement of the supervisor which itself is a story. Improbable but not impossible narration has also been fully utilised by this gifted Urdu writer. His narrative mode starts moving around a chain of indeterminate signifiers.

Along with Naiyar Masood some young Urdu short story writers such as Abdul Samad, Qamar Ahsan, Salam Bin Razak, Hussainul Haq, Syed Mohammad Ashraf, Anees Ashfaq, Anwar Khan, Mazharuzzaman Khan, Paigham Afaqi, Ghazanfar, Tariq Chattari and Mohsin Khan frequently use both traditional and modern story telling modes. Abdul Samad, who was honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *Do Gaz Zameen* invigorated the traditional realist narrative blended in carefully crafted structure. His writings present a situation shaped by the ambivalent attitudes of the characters who are sensitive to the vicissitudes of the age they lived in. Balraj Komal says: "Abdul Samad presents the human drama by invoking event, action, reaction, dialogue and description together."[10] His characters look innocent, insecure and familiar. The inevitable loss of innocence leaves them bewildered. Despite belonging to a specific religious minority, the characters become carriers of universal human feelings. The all-pervasive insecurity prompts them to seek refuge in ambivalence. Abdul Samad's recent novel, *Khawabon Ka Sawera* is a socio-cultural saga which attempts to extend the limits of individualistic novel. It also reflects the apprehensions of the minority community that has been afflicted with a tirade unleashed by the fascist forces. The hero, who joins the mainstream, also allegorises and mocks at some prominent personalities of the society.

The Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel, *Identity Card* by

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Sa'ahuddin Parvez undoubtedly illumines the frequent use of non-fiction modes which is unparallelled in the history of Urdu literature. His novels may be branded "polytopic" as the narrator's trenchant comments are communicated in a very comical and playful manner. The novel deploying the imagery of delight, abounds in political, social and mythological allusions.

Seldom does fiction criticism give assent to confessional themes but it is also true that some great novelists have structured their novels on personal experiences and confessions. Qurratulain Hyder introduced the concept of family novel but confessional novel plotted along a narcissistic fantasy has been launched in Urdu with the publication of *Gyan Singh Shatir*, written by a little known author, Gyan Singh Shatir. It is an uncontrived tale of unedifying fantasy of a self-engrossed youth who sometimes draws voyeuristic pleasure and also scoffs at God. The avowal is completely free from self-exaltation, on the contrary, the jagged realistic narrative shows the author's propensity towards self-effacement. At times, the narrator's much-proclaimed self-obliteration gives rise to self-pity, an oft-repeated romantic attitude. Shatir's flawless narration not only aims at expanding the lexical and syntactic range of language but also attempts to raise the existing vocabulary. It also touches upon the sentiments in the reader. Heaping praise on the novel, G.C. Narang observes,

> It is a very well written, candid and full blooded account of a growing sikh young boy born in a remote Punjabi village in a rather backward carpenter-family and it recounts his unusual experiences and struggle for survival in the face of heavy odds. It is a ruggedly realistic narrative, a real piece of art marked by a raw charm and lucidity of its own from the pen of a person who has not written before. The structure is that of a perfectly well-knit work, highly readable, gripping as well as shocking at places—In Urdu, the sikh pschye with all its strength and romance, ruggedness, down to earth qualities, rustic sense of humour and undoubted love for life has been delineated for the first time and that too on a high artistic level.[11]

The protagonist of this novel leaves his home before he attains adolescence because he cannot stomach the fiendish attitude of his father. The author cultivates two never-to-be forgotten characters. One of them is his father, Bhaiyaji who is a living embodiment of savagery and depravity. Ferocity, brutishness and viciousness are an intrinsic part of his personality. He never reconsiders his hasty decisions nor repents. His *modus vivendi* conjures up the feeling of aversion as well as detestation. Scarcely ever does one come across such an

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odious man. The protagonist rightly wonders why his mother used to live with him on the ignominious conditions which would have been unacceptable even for a prostitute. Balraj Komal, a noted creative writer remarks: "Bhaiyaji has tremendous decision making power and he never revises his decisions."[12] His personality is full of contradictions and his actions are a part of an inevitable continuance. Tayaji is the other unforgettable character whose utterances can easily be described as maxims. Gyan Singh Shatir has certainly set in motion a new trend in Urdu fiction.

Not unlike the short story, modern Urdu poetry, especially *nazm* (poem) too has shown its inclination for assimilating new communicative devices with a view to enriching the reader. The language of the contemporary poet is not only startling, symbolic and original, but it also cuts across all levels from street talk to academic discourse. While yoking the most unlikely things N.M. Rashid, and later on, Akhtarul-Iman strove to avoid self-indulgence. Akhtarul-Iman's visual images are densely textured and exude their meaning slowly. Narang describes him as a thematic trend setter,

> who has set the thematic direction of the contemporary *nazm* with his emphasis on philosophical humanism. In addition, he has influenced others with his use of monologue as a mode which continues to characterise his work.[13]

Akhtarul-Iman is the first Urdu poet who meticulously makes use of interior monologue blended with unrivalled imagery. His widely acclaimed poems such as "Ek Ladka" (A boy), "Yaden" (Memories) and "Mufahamat" (Compromise) bring out his deep-rooted optimism despite being trapped in an awkward predicament.

Apart from Akhtarul-Iman, Mohammed Alvi, Shahryar, Waheed Akhtar, Balraj Komal, Kumar Pashi, Ameeq Hanfi and Nida Fazli seek to come to grips with the extended wholeness of life. Balraj Komal, a Sahitya Akademi award winner, posits objects that seem to lie midway between the wholly literal and the symbolic. He uses a language of modulated rhythm and sonority. Mohammed Alvi, explores the poetic possibilities of slang and pidgin language and forgotten metaphors. His intent on "the thinginess of the object" is unparalleled in Urdu poetry. Alvi's short poems are often cryptic, fragmented and even unfinished because they invariably reflect his rebellion against the mores of contemporary 'market economy'. Shahryar's poems are unfailingly suffused with the pain inflicted by haunting reminiscences. There is an eloquent silence which manifests a transitory dream-like situation. It is not the suspension of reality

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but it is an appalling comment on all the panic and despair which find vivid expression in his creative world. One might hear in them a note of apology rather than a tone of assertion. His insistent reference to "dream" seeks to increase the difference between text and experience. It is quite evident that considerable force has been applied before an experience becomes a poem.

Besides *nazm, ghazal*—the much talked about genre in Urdu too has undergone poetic innovation both in form and content. Of late, *ghazal* has started modulating between the mimetic rendering of the dense particularities of the world and the poeticization of experience. Post-modernism also surfaces here as a host of poets are striving to create a 'semiotic space' instead of relying on pre-determined usage of language. This does not result in a pluarality of meaning but makes the meaning indeterminate. *Ghazal* now attempts to absorb all sorts of contradictions, ambiguities and complexities of the contemporary world. Shamsur Rahman Farooqui, an eminent Urdu critic, points out that "modern Urdu *ghazal* has shown a much needed irreverence towards the traditional themes of *ghazal.* New poets have also realised that both common and uncommon experiences and feelings can be lucidly expressed in a conversational style. The elasticity of *ghazal* has also been extended".[14] Stepping into the shoes of post-modern writers, new poets have made it a point not to avail themselves of "the predictable and institutionalised language of *ghazal.*" Some of them make use of conversational style with emphasis on displacement of signifiers. Shahryar, Irfan Siddiqui, Ishrat Zafar, Waali Asi, Amber Bahraichi, Farhat Ehsaz, Azad Baduuni, Ashufta Changezi, Mehtab Haider Naqvi, Manzoor Hashmi and a host of poets committed to modern sensibility have given up the worn out themes and trite metaphors of *ghazal.* Their naivete seems to be full of sophistication.

The post-modern poet is not merely an imagist but sometimes he takes some key-words from the repertoire of the classical *ghazal.* Ale Ahmad Suroor, veteran Urdu critic, eloquently sums up the state of modern Urdu poetry :

> Modern poetry is passing through an age of transition and experimentation. It will not be proper to compare it with our classical poetry or even Iqbal. Right now, we should not be beguiled by the desire to pronounce judgement, rather we should look at the new poetry in terms of significant and non-significant creative efforts.[15]

The view that criticism in Urdu, on the whole, has hardly imbibed any rigorous and well grounded literary theory also seems ubiquitous. Constant privation on this count has impelled it to concentrate on

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highlighting metaphysical, mystical and romantic aspects of the art form. Until now, it seems to be reluctant to work towards a well-defined, congruous, literary theory. Subsequently an epistemological and theoretical framework has not developed as yet, though criticism as a significant literary genre made its presence in Urdu felt with the publication of Hall's monumental work *Muqadame Shero Shairi* in 1893. These views are not completely unsubstantiated but of late Urdu criticism has started ingesting contemporary literary theories.

In the 1940's, Marxism made its way into Urdu with the formation of the Progressive Writers' Association. Some prominent critics belonging to P.W.A. sought to highlight the social relevance of the art form. Criticism committed to Marxism made a tremendous impact on Urdu literature.

Later, New Criticism had relegated it to the second place. Formalist criticism spearheaded by S.R. Farooqui, G.C. Narang and some others pulled Urdu criticism out from the quagmire of non-literary values. Their painstaking effort helped criticism in getting itself extricated from the bond of theme-centred critical assessment. Far from treating criticism as a casual activity, S.R. Farooqui took pains in getting literature recognised as a self-contained entity or monad. He also revivified criticism by insisting upon the close study of the text. Analysing both surface and deep structure of the art form meticulously rather than paraphrasing the theme, Farooqui opened new vistas. For the first time in Urdu, Farooqui made a candid distinction between prose and poetry. Contrary to the widely held view that metre is the hall mark of poetry, he described creative usage of language as the pre-requisite for poetry. His more than a dozen books and a plethora of articles containing the fruits of painstaking study and critical insight bear eloquent testimony to his effort. In his recent substantial study of Mir, *Sher-e-Shor-Angez*, Farooqui exquisitely deflates many myths about Mir's poetry. Perhaps, he is the first Urdu critic who places Mir in the eastern poetics' perspective. He also connects his poetry with the latest western literary theories. Having analysed both the theoretical and syntactic levels of his poetry, Farooqui arrives at the conclusion that Mir's poetry owes much to oral tradition.

Besides New Criticism, archetypal, mythical and structural criticism in Urdu got an impetus when G.C. Narang's profound and insightful writings started enlivening the contemporary critical scenario. He blazed a new trail in Urdu criticism by employing stylistics and semiotics in order to open new horizons of human consciousness upon Urdu knowing readers. Narang's writings are not only aimed

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at suggesting possibilities in reading literature but also touch upon almost every genre from *ghazal* to modern short story and classical poets to contemporary poets. Farooqui's attention to poetry and poets undoubtedly went a longway in promoting a better understanding of poetry but it also engendered the need to know more about fiction.

Narang made it a point to supplement what has been relatively ignored and wrote extensively on fiction. He also deftly applied stylistics and semiotics in his studies of Mir, Iqbal and Faiz. Modernism's much touted espousal of "Enlightenment Project" which was aimed at ushering in a new era of hope, prosperity and multifarious human development in all spheres of life, went astray in that the human existence has lost its inner vitality. Human life became subservient to its unremitting strife for success. Happiness too has been made a commercial commodity. All-encompassing commercialism has usurped all other values. This has prompted some thinkers to declare that progress is a myth. Modernism and its application in literary criticism have also come in for scathing criticism. The emergence of structuralism has made us realise that language is not a transparent medium; on the contrary, it is not even a medium; it is a form aimed at constructing the world consisting of things and persons. It becomes operational only at the level of differentiation. Structuralism has also zeroed in on "how does man comprehend reality?" It has presented a radical theory of interpreting literary texts, and the concept of meaning. It strikes at the roots of the metaphysical concept of meaning. Structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, reader response theory and their relationship with eastern poetics have been made known to Urdu speaking people by Gopichand Narang. His recent enduring book *Sakhtiyat, Pas-Sakhtiyat Aur Mashriqi Sheriyat* (Structuralism, Post-structuralism and Eastern Poetics) is aimed at providing a veritable update on new literary theories and post-modern philosophical discourses. Having yoked eastern poetics with structuralism and post-structuralism assiduously, Narang proffered a consummate discussion on the new model of criticism.

Besides Shamsur Rahman Farooqui and G.C. Narang a host of other critics such as Waris Alvi, Shamim Hanfi, Baqar Mehdi, Fuzail Jaffery and Mahmood Hashmi also have contributed significantly to the growth of new trends in Urdu criticism. This is not to suggest that Urdu criticism was carried away by the formalist criticism in the 70s and 80s, because Mohammad Hasan, Qamar Raees, Sharib Rudalvi, S.R. Kidwai and Aqeel Rizvi practised Marxist criticism with vigour. Their relentless efforts went a long way in shedding light on the social relevance of the art form.

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A.A. Ansari's thought-provoking textual studies are geared towards providing a candid and dispassionate appraisal. A.A. Suroor, who has been dominating the literary scenario for fifty years has recently published three books which show his penchant for new trends. Besides them, some young writers including Qazi Afzal Hussain, A.K. Qasmi, Anees Ashraq, Shamsul Haq Usmani, Saleem Shahzad, Khurshid Ahmad and Aqeel Ahmad with their understanding of eastern literary theories in particular and western thoughts in general, have enlivened the contemporary literary scene. Post modern theories, especially deconstruction, has found a ready protagonist in Qazi Afzal. His articles on the post-modern in literature and the problems of interpretation made it clear that he never shied away from applying new theories to Urdu Literature. A.K. Qasmi, with his thorough grounding in Arabic and Persian has insisted upon a thorough rhetorical analysis of the work. Qasmi's recent remarkable book *Mashriqi Sheriyat Aur Taneeq Ki Rawayt* meticulously highlights the tremendous impact of Arabic and Persian poetics on Urdu. □

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History by Ralph Russell; Delhi : Oxford University Press; 1992 pp. 285; Rs. 300/-

HISTORIES of literatures play a vital role in the evaluation and appreciation of literatures by providing, *inter alia,* the perspective of traditions/milieux etc. in the light of which individual authors/texts are to be assessed and evaluated. It is considered a necessary adjunct to the study of literature, so much so that in all the developed literatures of the world it has become a discipline in itself and one finds useful histories of literatures which are continually rewritten from fresh perspectives in response to the new areas of human thoughts made available to them. In our own country, the Sahitya Akademi (The National Academy of Letters) considered it essential to publish histories of literatures of India in all the languages recognized by the Indian constitution. Even this has been found to be inadequate for an understanding of the relationship between different literatures. Rather it has presented problems of its own kind becasue the language-literature equation does not hold good in an essentially multi-lingual and multi-cultural country like India. Multi-lingualism has been a fact of life here for centuries and it is more often the case that the same writer writes in more than one language. That is why the Akademi felt it necessary to publish the holistic *A History of Indian Literature* in ten volumes of which volumes viii and ix by Sisir Kumar Das have come out. Here the emphasis is on interpenetration and crossfertilization of overlapping genres/themes/ movements across languages. Needless to say, this history will contribute to a fuller and richer understanding of the literatures of India.

Though Urdu is one of the most developed of the dozen or so major languages of the sub-continent, efforts to take the treasures of its literature beyond its linguistic

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confines have been negligible. It is regrettable that very little material is available in other Indian languages for a study of Urdu literature. As far as English is concerned, the situation is a shade better, thanks to the efforts of scholars in some of the academies of Europe and America, notably the language departments of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and the Universities of Chicago, Oakland and Wisconsin in the U.S.A. Ralph Russell, formerly with the S.O.A.S. has had a long association with Urdu as a scholar and a teacher of the language. His book *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature : A Select History* is a commendable intervention in the way histories of Urdu literature have been written in English and fills a little of the gap which, of course, is still left widely gaping and which is clamouring to be filled up.

The earliest of the histories of Urdu literatures in English are Ram Babu Saksena's *A History of Urdu Literature* (Allahabad, 1927) and T. Graham Bailey's *A History of Urdu Literature* (Calcutta, 1932). If Graham Bailey's brief and largely dull account of Urdu writers suffers from the lack of a sense of proportion, giving too much space to irrelevant details about unimportant writers and too little space to important ones, Saksena's larger version, though more readable, suffers from a lack of focus and is pretty limited in scope. Muhammad Sadiq's *History of Urdu Literature* (O.U.P., 1964) is certainly an improvement upon the former two, but what it shares with them is an attitude of Eurocentrism where the canons of European, especially those of English literature have been sought to be imposed on Urdu and the literature has been evaluated on those terms. This has, quite often, vitiated their judgement. Two instances, one each from Saksena and Sadiq, will illustrate the point. While discussing *masnavis*, Saksena says: "*The masnavis* ... are said to supply the place of epic and drama but fall very short of the requirements of those two great forms of literature." (p. 30) One may well ask why *masnavis* should conform to epic convention when it has a well-established convention of its own. Sadiq sometimes fruitfully traces the Arabic and Persian origins of some of the genres and literary forms in Urdu literature, but for him the temptation to parade his erudition gets precedence to an intimate understanding of the author/text. The following extract would make it clear :

> Akbar has not the geniality of Dickens or Fielding. He stands between the two extremes—not an Aristophenes, or a Cervantes, or a Rabelais, much less a Dickens or a Meredith, but a cross between Thackeray and Swift.
>
> (pp. 403-404)

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It is difficult to extract any sensible meaning about the real genius of Akbar from this magisterial judgement on more than half a dozen writers in a single breath. The comparisons are too unhelpful and pointless to deserve any comment.

The two books that may be said to have remedied the above situation to a certain extent are, *Urdu Literature* (Urdu Markaz, London, 1985) by D.J. Mathews, C. Shackle and Sharukh Hussain and *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* by Ralph Russell. The book by Mathews *et al* has, by and large, escaped the pitfalls of earlier histories except for the fact that the authors could have fruitfully dealt with the social and cultural milieux in greater depth.

Russell calls his book 'a select history' and then adds in the preface that it is 'a personal history' of Urdu literature. It is not a history of literature as we generally understand it. Rather it is a collection of essays on some major authors/genres arranged chronologically and then materials have been added in between for a sense of continuity. One of the essays, "Approaching Urdu Poetry" is written by Marion Molteno and another long one, "The Satirical Verses of Akbar Ilahabadi" is the product of a collaboration between Khurshidul Islam and Ralph Russell. Some of the essays were published earlier and have been adapted for the book in the appropriate form. The book is divided into three parts. The first deals with classical poetry from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. The second part is entitled "Literature in reaction to the British Rule" and covers the period, 1857-1922. The final part starts from about 1922 and comes up to the progressive movement.

The highlight of the book are the essays, "Approaching Urdu Poetry" and "Understanding the Urdu *Ghazal*." Both of them bring to bear a sensibility in the appreciation of this genre which is different in significant ways from the one born to the language and explore aspects of it not covered by, and which may not even occur to, native scholars. It is an intriguing feature of literary studies that the assimilation of a particular tradition by a mind nurtured in a different one often brings a freshness of perspective that benefit even those born to the language. The history of English literature by the French scholars, Legouis and Cazamian has unique merits of its own which the English have welcomed. The same may be said about these two essays by Molteno and Russell. Both the authors emphasize their initial difficulties with Urdu poetry coming, as they do, from an altogether different tradition. Molteno discusses the whole ethos a knowledge of which is essential to an understanding of Urdu poetry—the *ustad-shagird* convention, the *mushairas*—aristocratic and

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plebian, the style of recitation—*taht-ul-lafz* and *tarannum,* the tendency to exaggerate one's grief and finding solace by reciting a couplet etc. Russell points out how some of the components of ghazal look definitely puerile unless one is conversant with and sensitive to its conventions. An interesting insight is contained in the anecdote recounted by him as to how there was a deluge of protest when he had remarked in the course of a lecture at Delhi University that ghazal is mainly the poetry of illicit love, as we all know it is. The real merit of the two essays lie in clearing up the miasma of misconception plaguing Urdu poetry and dealing adequately with the controversy surrounding *ghazal.* Deriving from their own personal experiences the authors have charted the course that non-Urdu readers should follow if they intend to study Urdu poetry meaningfully.

The second significant aspect of the book is the extensive study of the poetry of Akbar Ilahabadi. Akbar has suffered great injustice at the hands of critics. The study explores the reason with insight :

> Akbar's fame is based—and quite properly based upon his humorous verse; and scholars tend to be rather solemn people who may enjoy reading humorous verse in the brief periods of recreation which they allow themselves, but to whom the thought simply does not occur that a man may express in humorous verse ideas just as significant, and basically just as serious, as, let us say, a man who writes a voluminous commentary on holy writ. (p. 129)

The authors have analysed the whole spectrum of Akbar's poetry and demonstrated that Akbar was not a blind antagonist of progress and English education as he is commonly considered to be. Rather his poetry serves as a corrective to the attitude of servile imitation of the west and it critiques the pretensions of the colonial masters. Akbar's fierce attack on the establishment and its stooges need not necessarily be construed as his rejection of everything western. It was an anguished cry against the valorisation of suspect colonial mores over Indian/Islamic values. His criticism of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan should not be over-emphasized because he had also some good things to say about him and his institution. However, Akbar had absolutely no illusion about the British masters and he rejected out of hand the rhetoric of the 'whiteman's burden' and the professed enlightenment and benevolence of the whites. Implicit in a satirist's critique of the *status quo* is always the vision of a society shorn of its prevalent vices and the essay brings it out fully and restores Akbar to the status that is rightfully his.

The third important essay in the book is, "Faiz Ahmad

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Faiz—Poetry, Politics and Pakistan." We know that a veritable translation industry is being built up on Faiz's verses and the poet has become something of a myth in the sub-continent. Russell has, to a great extent, demystified Faiz and tried to evaluate the poet for what he was, dispassionately. He has done well to emphasize the lack of substance in Victor Kiernan's over-stressing of the solitary confinement aspect and Naomi Lazard's remark that Faiz "identified himself with the masses of the poor, the exploited, the victims" by putting across the views of Faiz's fellow-prisoners and friends in the progressive movement. This image-building exercise of a third world poet incarcerated by successive autocratic regimes was aided, at least not discouraged, by Faiz himself and it influenced the appreciation of his poetry. Faiz's immense popularity is not because his poetry transports us to a deep vision of life but because in it there is a blending of the romantic and revolutionary longings of the people in an idiom which is familiar and in a language which is extremely musical. Russell's final assessment of Faiz is—"Mir's best poetry puts him in the first rank of poets. I don't think that Faiz's does." It is a bitter pill for Faiz enthusiasts to swallow, but it will not be easy to refute it.

Having said all this one must point out that the book lacks a sense of proportion. Whereas Akbar Ilahabadi has been given the most extensive treatment through close textual analysis running into 47 pages, Russell's studies of major poets like Mir and Ghalib are rather cursory, running into 12 pages each. One possible reason for this could be that after book length studies of these poets in *Ghalib : Life and Letters* (O.U.P., 1969) and *Three Mughal Poets* (O.U.P., 1969), written in collaboration with Khurshidul Islam, he finds pretty little to say about them without repeating himself. Whatever the reason, this unequal distribution of space is likely to prejudice the reader about the comparative merit and status of these poets. Space-wise, Iqbal fares slightly better in Russell's hands (22 pages) though here he mainly concentrates on the message aspect of Iqbal's poetry. This essay is largely a cryptic summation of the existing body of knowledge on Iqbal. It is somewhat of a disappointment that though Russell has written an illuminating study on Faiz, he has not even mentioned his illustrious contemporaries in the same field, namely, N.M. Rasheed, Miraji and Akhtarul Iman who are not lesser poets, if not greater, even if they may not have achieved the same kind of popularity.

Fiction has been given very little space, Premchand being the only author who has been given individual attention; that, too, with reference to his short stories only. Among the five pillars of the second generation—Manto, Bedi, Krishan Chander, Ismat Chughtai

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and Qurratulain Hyder—only the first four have been treated, cursorily. The fifth one does not find even a mention.

As suggested in the beginning, there is urgent need for a comprehensive history of Urdu literature in English. Russell has appended a useful reading list at the end of the book which will serve as background material for future historians. *A History of Indian Literature* referred to earlier, will serve as a comprehensive indigenous framework so that they will not have to refer to the canons/genres of western literatures unnecessarily, to the detriment of Urdu. One hopes that Ralph Russell's book, whatever its blemishes, is the first step in this direction. □

M. Asaduddin

THE MIDNIGHT MOON AND OTHER STORIES by Kishori Charan Das. New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1993, pp. 160, Rs. 75.

THIS book is a collection of sixteen short stories, some inspiring, some insight-provoking and the rest, unputdownable, and they have been well chosen to give the reader a perspective on a variety of experiences. All the stories are set in a solid, social milieu which perhaps gives them a common human appeal. A story like "The Broken Taj" could be seen in all its colours only by an investigative eye, because not only is the 'Taj' broken, but so is Gita's world and also the language of the story. The 'Taj' in this particular story comes out as a potent, all-embracing symbol, whose significance dawns only after the third reading, and which perhaps stands for all our dreams and aspirations. Undoubtedly, one finds it disappointing that such a powerful emotive symbol does not reappear in other stories. But in Kishori Charan Das, every story has its own symbols, characters, totems and faults. Similarly, stories like "A Saucer of Milk", "The Dispossessed" and "The Hundred Sons" are all exuberant pieces, illuminating our minds. The writer himself says that he twisted a real life experience into a story and was inspired by the idea of Gandhari spewing forth the hundred sons, implying that those students-cum-political workers like the Kauravas, were hopeless young men, lost to our society for ever. But by the end of the story, we notice a glimmer of hope. But a little more tautness and some more imagination—and the story could have become a real masterpiece. "The Prayer Room" (Oriya original "Thakura Ghara") is again a very

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appreciable story which could have been endowed with even more universal human appeal had the story been brought to a more definite ending. In the Introduction, Das says that his stories try "opening out to horizons that might be reached some day", and I find myself not agreeing with his argument because it gives him a justification for some indefinite endings. Moreover, in "How much Land does a Man Need?" by Leo Tolstoy, the protagonist, even after understanding that his greed for land is futile, has to die because only such an ending could have made the story into a great and moving work of literature.

"The Meaning of Monsoon" is a short story in its true sense and it could have been more dramatic but the story seems to us, to be little more than the mere narration of an experience, real or imaginary. Stories of this type have been written earlier and only those with an element of wonder in them have survived. Das acknowledges that he finds himself torn apart between finding and not finding 'story value' in incidents like the assassination of a leader, or the blowing up of a railway track, and he has every right to search for stories in any given situation. But it is also beneficial to remember for the sake of art that any twist given to any situation may not succeed in creating a short story.

Das's idiosyncrasies would have been very likeable had they not been so overtly and grossly justified in the Introduction, which tends to give a strong anti-romantic flavour to his, otherwise slightly romantic, slightly realistic, savoury stories; and by unnecessarily justifying his idiosyncrasies Das has unfortunately, albeit unconsciously, created a facade or arguments and principles. □

Roomy Naqvi

PEYARILENNA. Poems (Tamil) by Neela Padmanabhan, Coimbatore: Vijaya Priting House, 1993, Rs. 20. pp. 108

ON reading these poems one realises all over again, that poetry is poetry only when it electrifies. A light has to flash on the mind. A darkness that had blocked the inner reaches, has to be dispelled, as if by a wand. This electrifying effect never takes place on reading these poems of Neela Padmanabhan. And this, amidst a wealth of poetic gifts. The high pressured onward movement, for instance. It cuts its way unwaveringly through the vocal density of the poetry.

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This steady, onward motion amidst thick surrounding outgrowths, gives the poetry a fierce power. Tamil, (and perhaps the other Dravidian languages too) has a quality of pressing down heavily on its consonants, doubling their strength. The pressure could be before or after the consonants. Either way a particular interweave of the language is effected, a heavy, solid interweave from the conjunctioning consonant. The language, whether in speech or writing, gains its urgency from this factor. In addition to this natural advantage Padmanabhan gets from the language, is his fertile imagination. He sees life, the world and the human condition, in a vivid mix of the macabre and the beautiful. The poetry becomes live with a certain animal vitality.

Take the poem "Naangal" (Us). Reduced to its prose base, the poem says: "Disdaining to find the time to care for our fathers and mothers who gifted us birth, nurtured us and made us men, we are ever-ready to char ourselves as live sacrifices for doddering leaders on their death beds. The diamond-sharp sword which we seize to battle the dictator (who is) suppressing, oppressing and effacing us, we, splintered into groups, fling and fling again into ourselves, beheading ourselves, (and thus we) shall die, are dying."

The key words and phrases here, "fathers and mothers", "death beds", "char ourselves", "diamond-sharp sword", "within ourselves", "fling and fling again", "shall die, are dying", come with the stressed power of the language, we noted earlier. Secondly, they are embedded in a base of short, quick-ending phrases, which are not nouns, adjectives or verbs denoting violent, masochistic action, but are phrases that speak of habitual non-thinking action. They key, stressed words, thus, come with sharp focus, in their context of light words, and need a very powerful climax to charge them into metaphorical dimensions, which would give stature to the poem and make it omnipresent.

This does not happen. It could have, if Padmanabhan's sense of myth and mythology were marked by a boldness, leading him on to refashioning mythology's many vivid images and imagery into a new iconography. One of the poems, where the absense of such a sovereignty of the creative act is keenly felt by the reader, is "Viraha Ganam" (Song of Separation). The poet is addressing death, designating it his beloved. "Come to me, beloved, with the music of your toe rings striking the floor", he says. "Cast your sidelong glance at me, the new *shudra* in this age of professional swindlers who have become the new brahmins, and put your lotus feet on my left breast, let them sink, play: let me have at least the peace of the demon (who was) ground under the feet of Kali ..."

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There is undoubtedly power in these lines. The voice is a sustained high note, and the bitter-sportive petitioning of death is compelling. But the ecstatic, impassioned mode of addressing the god which is being invoked, is conventional. It is informed by the spirit of bhakti that we know well. For all its satire, the basic relationship of the exclaiming poetic voice with the god he is exclaiming to, is that of the devotee. The mixture of taunt and appeal for mercy, of accusation of the god, and demand for redemption asked of the very god being accused, are all well known aggresive- rightful stances of devotion.

This fixed stance has to be broken. An assertion of human paramountcy over divine omnipotence has to be made, if the poetry is to pass from rhetoric and declamation to silence and mimesis that decode—at least seem to—the enigmas of life. In the absence of this elevation the poem is limited to an aural level. We listen to the thunder of the rage. We listen to the flow of words which seems tireless, of unabating zest and unbounding energy. But we miss the cohering thought or suggestion that would have gathered and bound the several outward-flowing utterances. Such a bind would have trained the utterances into an inward orientation. It would have complemented the ear with eye, the eye that contains all the other senses. It would have balanced the straining ear with comprehensive eye, the aural with the non-aural, and given completion to the poem.

In "Nalam Sirakka Varuga" (Come, Lord, for the prosperity of the good), the banality that results from piety, however tunefully sung, is even more glaring than in "Viraha Ganam". The poem takes off on a higher, more fervent note than the latter. It has three sections, arranged symphonically. The first, with its high, invocatory note goes on for some seventy or eighty short lines. Slight modifications of the metallic ring of the invocatory voice occur in the course of these lines. The abstract and latent verbal content of the invocation is made tangible, and the nudity of rapture is given a raiment of speech. The abstract undergoes a further, down-to-earth change at the end of the section, when hope and the culture of life upon earth, gain free run of the verse. The words are terse. Each line is either one single word, or has the weight of meaning piled on to the second word. This is mostly a word denoting a desirable process of becoming (Uivikkattum) (Sirandidattum), meaning 'may it come to life', 'may it attain glory.'

From this medium pitch of tone, the second section take off on a complex, cadenced note. The voice becomes questioning, stern. It demands self honesty, resonableness and the give and take of just behaviour. It says, proxying for the god implored: "If you, O comp-

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laining, reproaching poet, you, without evasion, did the good that falls to your lot from the mountain of good waiting to be done in this sad, unhappy land, I, the divinity you are addressing, will do my share of good without ado."

The third section is of joy re-discovered. The invocatory tone revives. The rapturousness revive, strengthened by faith and understanding. The imagery is fresh, baptismal. "The infant moon of the new year (the divinity to which the poet addresses himself) smiles, its lovely, pearl hued teeth flashing. I (says the poet) stretched my hands to scoop the infant up. The doors within me opened wide. A dazzling light (shone) on the horizon. Facing the new year's luminousness, I joined my hands in prayer. (And) Praying for the well-being of mankind, faith undimmed, I raised my right foot (the auspicious foot) and took the first step towards a new dawn."

The change in the thrust of voice that occurs in each section in this poem, changing the *naad* and the *dhvani* of diction, is compelling, as we said. But the poem remains grounded, wingless, devoid of the capacity to soar. For the thought is hackneyed. The religious fervour is also hackneyed. It is genuine. But genuineness does not make poetry. Rage at the cant of life today is the other genuine sentiment in the poem. It is the instigating factor of the poetry. And perhaps it is to be the breeding ground of myth for Padmanabhan, not the religious fervour, as one would imagine. The rage gives rise to the violence that is so distinguishing a mark of Padmanabhan's poetry, a fact which Ayyappa Paniker points out in his Introduction. There is a knife-edged keenness to this violence. It certainly gives strength to the poetry. But the violence is a detail. It is only a by product of the rage. The rage remains the dominant sentiment. But it is not a poet's rage, particularly. It is the rage of a sensitive mind, no more. It is a pity that with all its assets, poetry has not resulted from this poetry. Poetry just has to be of weightier stuff. □

CHAKRA. by Jayawant Dalvi, translated from Marathi by Gauri Deshpande, Disha Books, Price Rs. 65, pp. 100, 1993.

THE question that asks itself immediately after one finishes reading this translation is, whether English slang is a right substitute for a racy vernacular. We assume that the Marathi original of this novel by Jayawant Dalvi is racy. Otherwise, the slang, so assiduously

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and intentionally employed in the translation would not have been felt necessary by the translator. Whether this raciness truthfully and credibly expresses the characters of the people it portrays is a companion question that rises on the heels of the first, and will have to be considered alongside.

Slang is not international or inter-cultural. It is not the same even in the same region or the same stretch of land. Its action is local, the localisation of the character speaking it, rooting him or her more firmly in the milieu depicted. It illuminates the gestalt of the writing, the quality unspecifiable in narrative. Two slangs, it follows, cannot be interchangeable, cannot proxy for one another. Take these sample senctences in the book. "You okay, son?" "What you got f's us?" "Giddup, Up! That won't get you nowhere". "C'mon". "You siddown". "...everything'll be a'right". In the sound effects they produce they bring to mind cowboy characters in a wild west novel. The images evoked are of grizzled, Gary Cooperish figures, belts below hips, sten guns in holsters, sombreros fixed on heads.

But the people speaking that language are human dregs in a Bombay slum. The fact that they are dregs might be held up as a justification for the chewed language, cast from aborted words and gagged vowels. Desperate states of living, marked by lacks never to be remedied, find their outlets of aggression on the body of language, it could be argued. One grants this. But the aborting and gagging, still, have to evoke believable images. There has to be an internal assonance between the heard speech and the evoked image. No. Slang is too obviously sired and mothered, its parentage not possible of being fuzzed.

However, the real question here goes beyond language. It has to do with the perceptions of the author into his subject, the quality of his forethought into it. And here, the charges one is forced to levy against Dalvi are grave indeed.

He has gone berserk in his induction of violence and brutalisation in the story. Violence too, like slang, differs in its expression from people to people. There is a directness to this violence, a too close and unspaced feel to it, that does not ring true, and appears borrowed. Further, it seems as if the writing was done with the film in mind. That it was filmed eventually, seems no accident. The text carries over its imperceptions to the screen. The screen glamourises the falsenesses of the text, and ensures its reputation as a landmark in literature.

In *Chakra*, the lead character Looka is given to bragging. Now, bragging is very much a part of the portrayal of violence in our

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literary traditions. The arch villains of mythological drama brag. In loud, stylised, egotistical speech and gesture, they brag about their prowess, their immunity to death, their special relationship with destiny. They are proud and committed enemies of the good. But Looka is no vintage villain of this kind. He is a petty crook, a bottlegger under arrest, and out on parole. When he brags, it is no heroic roar of an anti-god that we hear, but the jacked up squeak of a drunk. Underlying his aggressiveness is no weighty, ideological conflict of the good with the bad, but the foul mood of a common crook, struck with disease, and come to the end of his rope. This condition is sought to be glorified by the author as the just wrath of the underdog.

It doesn't work. Such a justification is a cliche. To acquire force it has to be spelt out through solid political action. Dalvi is not a-political, of course. His Marxist passion is obvious. But it is not shown in action, action that is decisive, and denotes choice. In a political novel, inner and outer tensions, as shown respectively in the thinking of the characters, and the development of events outside, are expected to be weighted equally, to culminate in an explosive act of emergence by the protagonist. No such distribution, paralleling and climaxing marks *Chakra*, with the result that Looka's wrath does not rise above bad temper, sentimentality and histrionics. Dalvi just leaves it to the macho violence he considers the ideal medium through which to tell and dramatise his story. And a breakdown of this macho violence shows it as resting too often on the guttural speech only. The incidents are journalistic or forced. There is one stressed image in the narrative. It is static, and hence interpretable as a motif too. This image cum motif is of the krounchavadha episode in the prelude to the *Ramayana*. The episode, as we know, is of a pair of krouncha birds in the act of sex, being shot down by a hunter. The sight, witnessed by Valmiki, catapults him into poetry, the shloka form and the Ramayana saga. The boy, Benwa, has been seeing the calendar representation of this scene all along, is fascinated by it, without knowing the myth or the story.

We see Looka swagger up to the shopkeeper swindling Benwa. He points his gun at the swindler, mutters through his teeth in proper Clint Eastwood style, "Pay up, yah, fast". The man pays up. But the punch of that scene comes only from the speech, unreal and illegitimate as it is. The act itself—the toughie pointing his gun at the cheat and making him buckle under—is nothing startling. This entrenching of an illegitimacy, of course, further illegitimises the work as a whole. Sometimes the speech recedes, and in the merciful silence that ensues, the characters emerge clearer in line and profile. But other faults

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intrude. We see, for instance, Looka strip a prostitute of her clothes, hang her like a rag over his hand, and show her to Benwa, in a play of initiation. "Here, touch her, feel her". This is innovative, in a way. Speech here does not altogether recede, to produce total relief, but it is proportionate with the action. The point, however, is that the scene is meant to chill the reader with its no-holds-barred brutality. But it comes across as just coarseness, a deliberate attempt to shock, and is far from the transfixing and impersonal violence of a great, committed character.

Sexual savagery, indeed, is a pronounced feature in the climate of violence Dalvi creates. In the scene of the marriage of Benwa and Amli, he plays up this feature to the hilt. The police come breaking into their room on their wedding night. The police are chasing Looka, who has stolen some ampoules for his ailment, from a chemist's shop. An orgy of brutality is let loose in the room as Benwa grapples with a policeman, overpowers him in the sheer fury that sweeps him at the savage transition he has to make from bridegroom about to unite with his bridge, to quarry pushed against the wall. The whole construct of eroticism and savagery is a "live" enacting of the stressed imagery of the krouncha birds.

The enlarging and inserting of this motif cum imagery into an incident in the story is not the powerful scene it might seem to be. The writing here is not dialogue, which saves it from the synthetic slang used in the dialogue portions. But this has not meant a release into quality. There is a lot of thud and squelch and gore, with a good bit of anatomical specificity peppering the description of the action. We read it all, with a sincere and proper visualising of knees hitting bellies, thumbs hooking into windpipes, bodies flung down and heels lifted to touch the head, other heels crushing private parts. At the end of it we find ourselves unable to connect it all with Benwa. Benwa dissolves in our apprehension of him. The violence seems just a say-so of the author, a say-so constructed from crime and thriller fiction. We realise and concede the enormity of what has befallen Benwa. But the author intervenes too oratorically in the narration here, with a slogan of generalisation that runs counter to the trend till now. This trend has been one of individualising Benwa and the other characters, showing them in close up, over and above the typicalisations implied. "These are people, not fall outs in human shapes", the author is saying. But at the peak of the story the individualising and particularising are arrested, and the author personally enacts the role of a cornered man, whose name, if you want to know, is Benwa.

One does see that this dissolution of Benwa's individuality is

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actually meant to be a watershed in his re-birth as a prototypal figure. A vague and involuntary political stirring takes place within Benwa, as he is handcuffed and bundled off to the police station. He sees himself at the head of a body of armed men, opening fire on the policemen and setting them fleeing. He sees himself doing to the police just what they have done to him: flinging them down on the ground and bending their legs backwards till they touch the head, digging his boots into their private parts. As he stands in the lockup clutching the bars, he sees a calendar, just like his own, on the wall behind a policeman. He stares unblinkingly at the picture of the wounded bird, till its wound opens before his eyes, and seems to drop blood. "Drop after drop of blood" falls from the bird, in a private and prognosticatory rain of blood, visible to his eyes only.

The ideas of revolt, and of the rise of the guerilla leader, are firmer here. But the main objection we made before—that the fictional character and the events sketched seem disjuncted from one another—still holds good. The entire portrayal of the violence in this scene, meant to be clinching and a consolidation of the portents present—or meant to be present—in the narrative, seems a transcription of the course of violence foretold in manuals of revolution. It seems pre-existent. The whole structure of the work comes apart here, in an uneven mass of fictional and documentary modes. Benwa does not appear before the reader as a re-inforced figure, risen from the charged coming together of inner drives and outer happenings, but as the outline of a type of man Dalvi has convinced himself will emerge from the urban cesspool. It is the pampheleteer's voice that we hear here, not the creative writer's.

Apart from the bookish rendering of violence, other features of Dalvi's depiction of slum living also seem open to question. There is the utter lack of religion, for instance. Is there any Indian slum without its regular revellings in religious functions? Even the most hardened criminal, the most coarsened slum dweller, is not estranged from his reflexes of submitting to the It, the One Above, or the *Ooparwallah,* felt as bigger than all, who is beckoner and beckoned. We cannot imagine Looka without his framed pictures of Ganesh or Hanuman. And that is why we cannot believe that Benwa did not know the allusion of the calendar picture.

Divested of the religious dimension—call it superstition if you like— the inhabitants are shown leading a brute, belly level existence which is not true of the meanest and damnedest sections in India. Even in the midst of sordidness, and the grimmest and toughest battle for survival, life is never seen bereft of mystery, or a grand and

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mystifying unpredictability.

The worst sufferer of this lopping away of the many-sidedness of slum life is Amma, meant to be a kind of earth figure in her fecundity and voluptuousness. The author tones down these vast and universal attributes ascribed to earth goddesses, and makes Amma an anxious and yearning woman, dreaming of home, child and husband. (Her second husband, the first dead or untraceable) These normal yearnings are thwarted by the abnormal circumstances of her life, Dalvi further implies. We accept this qualification. But we cannot accept the stark, one track mind with which Amma pursues her objectives, throwing all conventional decencies to the winds. Again, we do concur with Dalvi's implicit reasoning, that, given her yearnings and her circumstances, she would be a-moral. But she would not flaunt her a-morality. This is what Dalvi makes her do, skidding on his leftist feet. A woman like Amma would be lavish with her sexuality, of course. But she would also spend a lot of her time and energy appeasing the gods. She would be unfailing in her visits to the temple, making her offerings to the prescribed deity of domestic bliss. But of course it does not suit Dalvi to show her thus. He has just become squeamish about religion. And the upshot of it is an overdrawn, under-portrayed character like Amma.

And music? Can one experience an Indian slum without being alive to the primal attraction that sound and rhythm hold for the dwellers? Just place a transistor in their midst. It will be on at full pitch—decibel counts and noise pollution be damned—and everybody happily tipsy with the syrupy flow from it. If not a transistor, a dholak would throb away in a clearing by the gutter, proclaiming an irrepressible community life, one that cannot be displaced by all the punks and drunks of the world.

Dalvi has suppressed these and other ingrained features of slum life. What he depicts is a sensationalised, accented slum setting, accented in the linguistic as well as formal sense of the word. It is genre writing at best, not creative. □

Raji Narasimhan

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ON THE BANKS OF THE YAMUNA (A orillas del Yamuna) by Pilar de Vicente-Gella. A bi-lingual edition, translated from the Spanish into English and introduced by Shyama Prasad Ganguly, Wiley Eastern Lt. New Delhi, 1993. pp. 73, price not mentioned.

THERE is an old controversy about who is the best reviewer for a translated literary text. Should it be a person with equal competence in both the languages who can comment on the texture and nuances of the translation, or a person who knows only the target language and will respond to the end-product as a new creation? As a bilingual reader I find it difficult to be completely satisfied with any English translation of a Bengali book, because as everyone knows, translation at best is only an interpretation; it cannot recreate the multivalence of the initial text. Hence, the usual practice of asking a bilingual to review a translated book I have often found to be self defeating, because unable to erase the memory of the original, these reviewers talk only about a shadowy text darkened by the superimposition of a pre-text.

Following the logic of this argument I should have been an ideal reviewer for the present volume because I do not read Spanish. But while attempting to write about this beautifully produced bi-lingual book of poems (Spanish on the left page and English on the right) I find myself quite inadequate for the task because poems have to be read in their literary context, and without the clues provided by the translator in the preface I would not have known that Pilar de Vicente-Gella is writing in the tradition of other poets in Spanish who had earlier used India as their reference point and raw material—Octavio Paz and Juan Ramon Jiminez for example. Reading the poems without this information might have led to a misreading whereby references to Yamuna and glass bangles, temples and minarets would evoke attenuated memories of the kind of poetry in English that went out with Sarojini Naidu.

According to the jacket information Pilar de Vicente-Gella spent some time in Delhi and these vignettes arise out of her experience of those years. The ethos is not 'Orientalist' because specific locations and persons are remembered with love and with an airy sleight of hand these memories are transformed into metaphors. A little girl with long black braids and large eyes flits in and out of these poems through whose glass bangles "sunlight juggles" to create "a limitless range of colours". As she buys ribbons for her hair in the Hanuman temple, chases squirrels near the Khan Market and puts flowers on

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her coconut oil-soaked braids, she becomes more than a little girl, radiating a ray of light through the pages. The poems begin with a concrete moment and proceed toward an apprehension of a reality beyond here and now.

It is obvious that the poet responded to India with warmth and spontaneity, but I would not dare to be as chauvinistic as the translator who claims in his preface that "simplicity, clarity and warmth" are "quintessentially Indian characteristics." No literary culture has the monopoly of either simplicity or sophistication. While the lyrical charm of these poems by Pilar de Vicente-Gella verges on the brink of philosophy, neither their apparent simplicity nor their references to familiar landscape (Qutub, Tughlakabad, Jama Masjid) or gods (Vishnu, Lakshmi, Ganesh) turn them into Indian poems. They remain poems inspired by India written by a visitor whose love for the place and sadness at parting transform the exotic into the symbolic.

Songs and lyrical poems are often the most difficult to translate because their transparency can be deceptive. Witness for example the disaster that the English *Gitanjali* is when compared to the original in Bengali. But the present translator has steered clear of the danger or banality and in certain passages achieved remarkable effects through the use of bare unadorned language. For example :

Tell me companion,
If you know of a place
Where water is still everyday.
or
My beloved has a name
that in echoes appear again
To whose rhymes tree-leaves move

Elsewhere the startling image-making of Vicente-Gella comes through to us powerfully, losing little in the language transfer:

When the earth, defenceless, abandoned,
is undressed and receives the semen of dews
or
all the errant stars of the sky
went to sleep in the palm of my hands
or
his boat is frail
but his thoughts serve as helm and sail

The erudite preface makes us alert to the layers of meaning that lie beneath the surface of the poems. We read about the philosophical

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significances of the concept of 'orilla' (bank or shore) and the "total integral cosmogeny built on the geometry of a triangular bond between the human, the natural and the divine representation." These are valuable pointers for re-reading the poems with greater understanding, but certain elementary facts might also have been useful. We are never told for example when the original Spanish volume was published or given the author's year of birth. These would have helped us to place her temporally in relation to the other poets of this century. But on the whole it is a volume that whets the reader's appetite, making him/her want to read more poems by Vicente-Gella, even those that do not deal with India. □

Meenakshi Mukherjee



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JOURNALS

Civil Lines. 1, Ed. Rukum Advani *et al.* Ravi Dayal Publishers, 51E, Sujan Singh Park, New Delhi-110003, Rs. 90. This well-produced journal is an occasional published by Ravi Dayal. This issue carries a fascinating piece of autobiography by the poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra; an informed article on Indian short story by Amitav Ghosh, an interesting account of a brief jail term in Bhopal by Radha Kumar, the recollections of a visit to Calcutta by Ramachandra Guha and some fine pieces of prose by Bill Aitken, Allan Sealy and Khushwant Singh.

Mimamsa. Vol. I, No. 1, Mar.'95. Ed. D.S. Mishra and R. Jadeja, Pub: Dept. of English, Sardar Patel University, Vallabh Vidyanagar-388120, Rs. 75. Annual Rs. 110. This magazine, stated to be 'a bi-annual journal of literary discourse' has seven Indian short stories by Ashokpuri Goswami, Himanshi Shelat, Mannu Bhandari, Amarkant, Ramsarup Anakhi, G.A. Kulkarni and Ramachandra Deva, poems by Dhoomil, Ghulam Mehjoor and others, an article on Postmodern Gujarati Short Story by Ajit Thakor and two book reviews.

Lyric (Bi-Annual) Ed. Ananya S. Guha *et al.,* Pub: The Shillong Poetry Society, Mitali, Laitumkhrah, Shillong 793003; Rs. 25; Annual Rs. 45. This journal solely devoted to poetry carries poems by Firaq Gorakhpuri, Makarand Paranjape, K. Satchidanandan, Prem Narayan Nath, Prabhanjan K. Mishra, Manmohansingh, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, Almond D. Syiem, Anjum Hasan and Thangjam Ibopishak. The special feature is a selection of Welsh poetry by five Welsh poets introduced by Nigel Jenkins. A serious and sincere attempt.

Scoria. Vol. I, No. 1, Ed. Urmila Mishra, Pub: Urmila Mishra, 3228/1, Sector 47-D, Chandigarh-160004, Rs. 14; Annual Rs. 60. This new quarterly journal of literature from Chandigarh has in its inaugural issue poems by Jayanta Mahapatra, Edith Konecky, Maxine Chernoff, Niranjan Mohanty, Sukrita and others, an interview with Leslie Marmon Silko, the native American writer by Aruna Sitesh, articles by Q.Z. Alam, Ali Khwaja, Tariq Wali, Shyam S. Agrawalla and a book-review. A welcome addition to little magazines, though the contents do not justify the publisher's description, 'a quarterly magazine for the connoisseur' especially when it comes to the articles most of which are just elementary like the one on Hemingway. □

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